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Echoes: mourning into daybreak

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Echoes: Mourning into Daybreak

by

James Francis Judge

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THE FIFTEEN-DOLLAR DEBUT
OF MR. LIBERTY

My kid brother had always wanted to be a superhero. That's right, a real superhero, the full bit--glamorous uniform, bold insignia, striking name, cape or mask if not both, secret identity. Had there been a potion or device or gamma ray or enchanted bracelet or extragalactic medallion capable of instilling some special power, Keith would've latched onto it lickety-split. Keith's career plans were a lot like the black hairs on his shins--dating from his days as a trike jockey but substantial only after he'd reached the seventh grade. His ambitions seemed to swing into high gear after he was sick so much that winter with the Hong Kong flu or whatever, which allowed him to spend four instead of the usual two hours a day at those "costumed adventurer" comic magazines of his. I remember Mom and Dad grumbling at Keith and each other about his getting way-gone with that stuff; they'd even had me "try and talk some sense into that child" when I was back from State U. over Christmas and spring breaks. But big brother Kirby had turned twenty-one that viral winter, and his journalism-school persuasiveness didn't cut it with the would-be superhero.

Anyway, everything hung out the following summer, the one a wise man would long afterward describe as the "last summer of the second golden age of comics"; I still don't know whether this age d'or ended because of comic-book content getting juvenile about that time, or on account of what

happened at the Fifth Annual Owensburg Old-Time Fourth of July Celebration.

Whatever the reason, it's more in line with what was then my professional self-image to say that the Fourth of July incident got its start during Nixon's first summer in the White House, just a few weeks before Apollo XI lifted off.

It was late morning on a Wednesday but seemed like a Saturday. I'd propped myself Indian-style and barefoot on the couch in the folks' living room. I was fretting over, among other things, what classes to take my next and final year at State. Dad was surveying for the new street the city had decided to build out near its maintenance garages, Mom was at the supermarket, and Keith had biked uptown to shoot his yardwork-money and allowance on I could imagine what. Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" crackled away somewhere in the background on the static-y radio. The front door was opened several inches, but my Nehru shirt from the previous season's wardrobe kept me warm enough. Thump . . . thump . . . thump . . . Somebody at the screen door, the Fuller lady, maybe.

The pubescent male voice was slow and sepulchral. "I am come for Kirby Evans."

No free vegetable-scrubbers for us that day.

"That's what it reads on my Selective Service card," I called out. If there were a character named The Grim Reaper, he was rapping his scythe against our door. I didn't bother to look.

"Your time is arrived. You needs must grant me entrance."

Actually I needed to read proofs at the Times-Democrat at twelve-thirty, and didn't care to be late. Internships were rough enough, especially in a hometown. I stiffly straightened my legs and rolled from the couch.

"If you haven't got green skin or a black ballet-outfit, come in and claim me. The screen's unlocked."

Keith let the screen slam behind him; he knew the folks were gone and I wouldn't say anything. Both his cheeks were red, and he sniffled; he'd zipped his hooded sweatshirt up all the way. The kid guarded a big, crumpled green sack under his left arm, pressing it against his ribs.

"Goddang, it's more like March out there! I thought that wind would annihilate me before I got back."

I pronounced it "an-hill-ee-ate" when I was his age.

"Weatherman told us last month that June'd be cool, breezy, and damp."

Keith looked at the floor, a sad expression in his eyes. "It's only been warm enough to go swimming twice since school let out."

"Don't worry. We'll have a summer."

Keith laid the sack on the carpet and threw his sweatshirt onto the couch. "How can you stand it in here with, uh, yon portal ajar?"

"I was sitting there, Spi-ro T. I'm a masochist, I guess. Have to be to live with you for a summer." I lit up an Old Gold and stuck the matchbook back in the coin pocket of my Lees.

"You're funny, Kirb, but looks aren't everything."

"Sides, I need fresh air to counteract all the newsprint and ink from those 'illustrated fantasy publications' you pollute the house with."

He plopped the big sack onto the overstuffed celery-colored chair. "No worse than the printing stuff you inhale at work--or those filter spins you suck on."

"Touché, touché." I pointed toward the sack. "Anyway, looks like you're blowing your money again. You read too many of those comics and you'll turn into a sex-offender and have nothing but buck-and-a-quarter-an-hour jobs the rest of your life."

I turned away so he wouldn't see me holding back the laugh. I felt some sort of family duty to chew on Keith about what a danger and all it was to feed his mind junk and not deal with reality.

"We studied in my Effects of Mass Media class about kids your age who'd gotten themselves messed up from movies and pop lit."

"I told you before I left, the end-of-the-month batch doesn't come in till Friday, Monday, maybe. I got really important stuff in here. Besides, what if there are comics in the sack--didn't I go right from the bottle to Superman reruns?"

Superman. Reeves.

I headed for the kitchen, Keith trailing me. "Speaking of food, is there any pork 'n' beans left in ice-a-box? I gotta eat and get to work." The kitchen was dark and cozy, the linoleum smooth and cool on the bare soles of my feet.

June '59. Suicide.

"I do'no. Hey, heat me up one of them Canadian bacon sandwiches. You know, on an English muffin, with a round cheese-slice."

I already had my head deep inside the fridge. "Flake off. Fix it yourself."

"I'm not sure how Mom does it."

I grabbed a plate from the cupboard and started slicing some leftover salmon-loaf. "Some super-dick you'd make--can't even fix your own C.B. and cheese sandwich." I inhaled a deep one from my O.G.

"Can I get you some bread for that, Kirby?"

"Yeah," I said, getting rid of some ashes in the sink. "And some butter and mustard, if you don't mind."

I ate standing at the counter, plate and ashtray and cup of milk in front of me. "Seriously, Keith--the folks are gonna crack down if you don't snap out of this comic-book mania. Life to you is made up of heroes, gadgets, and word-balloons. Mom thinks you're getting mouthy and 'withdrawn,' to use her word. Dad says he might bring you to the city engineer's office with him in the mornings and keep you there all day." I swallowed a tangy mouthful and took a quick drag.

Keith was looking down again, digging at his thumbnails with his index fingers.

"Working with slide rules," he said softly, "figuring problems out. And filing boring papers, keeping tables dusted. They've told me, too. That's about the only time they say much to me anymore--when they wanna bark at me, I mean."

I washed down a big bite with a gulp of milk. "You're exaggerating."

"Not much." Something about the half-light of the kitchen didn't seem so cozy just then.

"So what is in the sack?"

Keith looked up and almost smiled. The greenish gray of the kitchen had a friendly cast once more.

"Items pertinent to my career, Kirb."

I hadn't heard such an indomitable tone since I was younger than him.

I inhaled another deep one. "Blackjacks and skeleton keys?"

"You're sharp, college man, but even razor blades lose their edge."

He assumed a histrionic voice and pose, announcing: "Within that sack . . . are the materials which will propel me . . . " He clenched his fist and shook his arm. " . . . to superherodom!"

His stare hit me like an energy-burst from an MTPD---a molecular teleportation device. I should've started worrying right then.

Instead I stacked my plate and cup on the dirty-dish pile. "I'm going to brush my teeth and propel myself to work."

Keith zipped back to the living room, and from the kitchen I heard the crinkling of the sack. He called to me as I wiped up my crumbs.

"Okay, Kirb. I'll be down the basement doing pull-ups. I'll work with that rowing machine you got me, too. We superheroEs have to keep ourselves in shape, you realize."

I stuck my head in the living room on my way to the bathroom. "I keep in great shape lifting those heavy bottles to my mouth on Saturday night. Don't strain yourself, Keith, seriously."

He made sure the sack was closed then smiled at me gently. "I won't. Have a good afternoon."

"Thanks. You too. But if I hear any thunderclaps, or ray guns going off, I'll be coming down."

"Coming down with what--the belly flu?"

I grabbed a pillow from one of the butt-breaker kitchen chairs and stuffed it into his fuzzless face.

Aside from taking Friday off to buy and pore over the end-of-the-month batch, Keith spent most of the next three days in his room and down the basement. On Saturday night he hollered down the hall for me; his door clicked shut right after I yelled "comin'." I left my light on. I went in his room without knocking.

"Judas freakin' priest!"

"Shut the door, quick!"

My brother stood in the center of his room, highlighted by the last rays of the sun as they filtered through the drapes. Keith had laid ahold of a dark-blue baseball helmet, with earguards on both sides, for pete's sake, cut off the bill somehow and drilled or burned eyeholes into it, then epoxied the bill, bent downward, back to the headpiece to form a mask. Three glow-in-the-dark plastic strips--gold, crimson, light blue--encircled the headpiece itself, and a bright-yellow eagle perched proudly just above the reattached visor. The kid had cut the sleeves off a red V-neck T-shirt and emblazoned its front with a gold nylon Torch of Liberty; then he'd stitched white nylon stars--hand-cut, they looked to me--to the shirt in a V-shape along the collar, right above the bold

torch-insignia. He must've bought the blue Shakespearean gauntlets at the theatrical shop, embellishing them with more stars and plastic stripping. A red-white-and-blue surcingle belt held the glistening, red nylon swimtrunks in place; and a solid stripe of the same royal blue as the gloves went down the outsides of the dazzling white tights. Black jodhpurs--his dress shoes--shone blue, he'd polished them so long. Keith turned his back to me for a few secs so I could gasp at the alabaster and royal-blue sheen of the stripes he'd sewn in another V-form on the rear of the T-shirt; from one shoulder to the other glimmered an arc of more stars.

He faced me again and proclaimed in a deep voice: "Brother, you are the first living being to gaze upon . . . Mr. Liberty!"

I stuck an Old Gold into my mouth. "Mercy."

"So what do you think?"

I lit up. "Such language would be unbecoming to gents of our breeding. No wonder you've been so scarce and quiet since Wednesday."

"I've been in seclusion. In my secret lab."

"You'll be in traction if the old man and lady see you in that."

"Don't tell 'em, Kirby!"

I looked him over again, shaking my head. He was an amalgam of star-spangled characters. From the '40s were Marvel Girl and The Patriot and of course Captain America from Timely-Marvel, and The Shield from I forget where. I saw some Wonder Woman and original Flash from National, plus a tinge of TV's Captain Nice for good measure. There was even the

hint of some new villain I'd glimpsed on the surrealistic cover of one of Keith's recent Marvels, The Angry American or something like that.

"How much did all this . . . material cost? Where'd you find it?"

"Places around town. I hit the late-June sales. Cost me about fifteen bucks all told, I guess. The world's got need of me; I'll make my appearance on the Fourth of July."

I took a deep drag. "I don't know about any stripes, John Phillip Sousa, but you'll be seeing stars forever if you step out of this room in that getup." I shook a fist in his direction.

"There's more."

"Spare me."

I looked around Keith's room while he was going around his bed and lifting up the blanket. Wilson baseballs on his shelf, Amazing Spider-Man T-shirt tacked to a wall, Dynamo #1 atop the dresser.

Keith pulled something from beneath his bed. "Behold."

He held the object high overhead and flourished it with pride. Out of yellow plastic, wood stained dark blue, and metal painted crimson, the kid had fashioned a sort of twin-bladed axe, like what a Teutonic deity wields in an ancient carving, or like the tricolored hammer that sometimes stands for the French Republic.

"How considerate of you, Keith. The nice men in their white suits can conk you over the head with that before they haul you away to the loony-bin." Judas, I had a regular textbook-case on my hands.

"When I have more time, I'll rig my shoes--I mean boots--so that razor blades will whip out the fronts when I stamp my heels just right."

"Oh good God!"

"But that's minor. All I really have to do is construct my utility belt."

I bit down on the filter tip and shook my finger menacingly. "All I have to do is tell Dad and Mom about this, and you'll be spendin' every free minute from now till 1975 sweeping floors and emptying ashtrays down at Dad's office."

"Sshh! Please don't, Kirb. Becoming Mr. Liberty is my destiny. I practically cried when I picked up Life a couple weeks ago and saw that Neil Armstrong was gonna be the first to walk on the moon; I figured I was meant to be the first. July's gonna be here in two days, and today's the second time it's been above seventy since school got out. I saw a grape shrivelling in the sun today and thought, 'that's just the way my summer is--drying up before my eyes.'"

He took off the helmet and mask. "It's easy enough for you to criticize, college man. You were almost a senior when we moved over from Colwyntown, and you still had friends there. But I was on my own, going into fourth; that's a heck of a time to try getting in with a gang or 'queer-group' or whatever they call it in your courses at State U. Don't you understand?"

I moved close to him and exhaled smoke right into his face. "Look, Victory Boy or whoever. Have fun in this . . . uniform tonight. You worked hard on it. It's very artistic; I'll even take your picture. But if I see you in it again, if I hear any more about you 'appearing' like Christ himself on the Fourth, I'll tell the folks on you, lickety-split."

I left him standing in there--headpiece in one hand, hammer in the other--and closed his door. I slammed my own and dropped back into my dusty chair with the broken springs. That kid! He stayed up late every night watching TV, reading comic mags, guzzling chocolate milk, and chomping corn chips. He was five-seven and weighed a hundred and sixty. He'd be thirteen in a little more than three months.

"I used to have a fire in me just like Keith does," I thought, "but it burned out when I was about eleven."

I resumed fretting over, among other things, what courses to take my next and final year at State.

Dad peeked in my room a little later to say there was a call for me, some girl.

"Hello, Kirby? This is LaDonna Price. Remember me?"

"Sure. How're you, LaDonna?"

Man, I'd forgotten all about her. She'd graduated '66, too. She'd just finished RN training and was back in Owensburg for the summer, staying with her parents before starting a job in another state in August. She was one of the few people my age in Berwyn County who weren't married, mobilized, or moved on. LaDonna was a little big in the seat and kind of flat up front, but she was gorgeous in the face-department. Not only that, she was real nice.

"Say, Kirby, I'm going to the drive-in with my little sister Judy and her boyfriend--you remember Ray Kovak's brother, Bob, don't you? Why don't you come along? It's Once Upon a Time in the West."

"I work at the paper and didn't even know it was in town. Hey, I'd love to, Donna. But we got this family-tradition thing on Saturday nights, y'know? We get the late-show monster movie on and stuff ourselves fulla chips and dip and junk."

"Will they disinherit you if you pass it up tonight?"

"Well, I've had to work late every weekend since I got back except this one. They're sort of expecting me, if you know what I mean. Hey, could you come over here?"

"Better for me to keep an eye on Judy and Bob, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah." I wondered if little Kovak would call LaDonna's sister someday soon, and say he'd checked his mail and would be heading to Army basic before too long. Hazardous things, personal relationships.

"Hey," I said for the third time, "I'll be at church for a change in the morning. You still go?"

"We'll expect to see you there, Master Evans."

"Right. And maybe we can get together sometime this week coming."

"Let's count on it."

"Great talking with you, L.D." For a while I forgot all about next year, other things, and Mr. Liberty. LaDonna had heard I was back, and she'd called me.

An hour later the four of us were plopped on the fuzzy old sofa and chairs in the basement. We had snack foods and beer all ready for inhaling. I was geared up for something wholesome like Dracula or The Mummy. But the monster flick for that week must've come unspliced, so

Channel 6 ran a '40s serial strung together into a feature. Some dashing scientist and his glamorous assistant, played by Linda Stirling, were battling a masked Axis-agent called The Crimson Ghost.

Keith had already started in on the Falstaff and Pizza Spins.

"Great! I was gettin' tired of Wolfman Chaney."

Dad decided he was sleepier than he'd thought and went up to bed. Mom left a few minutes later, saying she needed to set her hair for church. If the folks realized how much the movie resembled Keith's favorite genre of fiction, they sure weren't showing it. But maybe this was their way of telling me that I had the grit to keep Keith on an even keel.

"Isn't this groovy, Kirb?" The villain had just made his first appearance.

"My rapture transcends the spoken word."

To think I'd passed up the chance to see a real movie with Donna!

"Wow, look at the way he handles himself, fighting three guys at once." The hero was grappling with some of the villain's goons. "I have to remember how to do that."

"Why?"

"Those skills will be indispensable to me in my career."

"Now I warned you, Wonder Moron, no more--"

"C'mon," he laughed, "this is Saturday night. Hey, gimme some Hamms for my spread and saltines."

I got us some during a lull in the action, icing Keith's down as much as I could. During one of those interminable commercials they used to

have to lure people into raising chinchillas, Keith asked why I hadn't gone to the drive-in with LaDonna.

I twirled my glass and pretended to study it. After a while I said: "Grandpa Evans always wanted me to visit whenever he'd ring us up, or to spend an hour with him on Sunday night, listening to old songs on the radio while Grandma wrote her weekly letters. But all I wanted to do was watch TV, read . . . stuff, and run around with Lewis and Bowen and that crowd. Come high school, I really wished I could talk with him. But by then Grandpa Evans was just a picture in a frame on the fireplace."

"You afraid something might happen to Mom and Dad, then? Or me?"

I didn't say anything.

"Or to you?"

I still pretended to be studying my glass. "Doubt it."

"But why take chances, is that it?"

Again, I didn't answer.

"Say, Kirb, you figure eagles fly high enough to hit the Van Allen radiation belt?"

"Doubt it. Oh, they might. What's it to ya?"

He turned his head. "I just wondered if I'd be able to fly if a radioactive eagle pecked me."

An intriguing thought. "Hmm." I licked some ham-salad spread from my plate. "It's possible. Stranger things have . . . Wait a minute. I thought I told you to clear your mind of--"

He laughed and bounced from his chair. He stood up straight, gut in and chest out. "You never know what might happen, Kirby. It pays to think about these things."

I rolled from the sofa. The chincilla commercial was almost over. It was time to slap up some corn chips, chive dip, and Falstaff. Munchener, this round, and water for the kid.

The scientist-hero got to put his arm around Linda Stirling in the tail-end frames. I wondered if LaDonna Price's hair was long like the heroine's. I shifted position near the end of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and saw that Mr. Liberty--Keith, I mean--was in superhero land.

I set our plates and glasses on the cardtable, switched off the TV, and studied my log-sawing brother. He'd overdone on the beer, but he only drank it on Saturday nights, and this was the most he'd ever had; he'd wake up at nine the next morning with the only aftereffect a moaning bladder.

Man, I wished I could be like him! He slept continuously for nine hours or more every night then rolled out of the sack in less time than it took my heart to get beating again in the morning. He washed down a bowl of Lucky Charms and a god-awful sweet roll with half-and-half and chocolate milk before hopping on his Stingray. He biked and swam and threw his baseball into a spring-net returner and smacked tennis balls against the west wall of Harrison Elementary and worked on the pull-up bar or rowing machine and mowed a different lawn each day of the week. He didn't stop till supper unless it was to have a Canadian bacon sandwich

with a can of RC Cola or to read the latest batch of comic mags. And invincible was the only word for that guy's dreams."

"Should I tell Dad and Mom about the Mr. Liberty bit?" I wondered. "Oh, heck," I thought, with what I'd someday call the disgust of ambivalence. I took my surplus Army field-jacket from the clothes tree behind Keith's chair, covered him with it, and prayed he'd never have to wear one with his name stitched above the left pocket. I left the small night-light on for him in the downstairs john, flicked off the big light, and headed up to bed.

We went to ten-o'clock services the next morning. Mom's hair looked all right. Keith read a comic magazine on the way, naturally. Reverend Jenkins started the sermon with his usual warnings against alcohol but then moved into a real good talk about being your brother's keeper. At least it seemed good till he finished; then, that "oh, heck" feeling from the night before came back. LaDonna was there, but she didn't have long hair like Linda Stirling had twenty-five years earlier. After services, while Keith and the folks talked in the vestibule with Floyd Pritchard, Donna and I visited outside. I told her about Keith's "career plans," even the name, but didn't mention the wardrobe.

"He looks older than just going into eighth," she said. "His face is more mature, I guess. And he is well-built."

"Just fat, if you ask me."

"Maybe he spends too much time reading." She almost laughed.

I dug around in my pockets. "That's kind of a sore spot at home. Really got bad this past year, I gather. A kid has enough trouble in

seventh grade as it is, when it comes to hitting it off with his--or her--teachers, parents."

I looked away from LaDonna for a second or two. The sky was so blue, as rich as the royal blue of Mr. Liberty's uniform.

"And . . . his being wrapped up," I went on, "in this comic-bookish, superhero-thing makes affairs that much worse."

The St.-John's-fire bushes were full, their crimson blooms as vibrant as the vest and trunks of . . .

"Well, Kirby, I'm sure things will turn out all right. I mean, it isn't like he comes from a family of psychos."

"Thanks."

"Neurotics, maybe."

"Thanks again. Say, the T.D.--the Times-Democrat--was gonna have me cover the fireworks display on the Fourth--Friday--but reassigned me to the six-o'clock tractor pull."

"They're prepping you for an exciting career in the journalism profession, aren't they?"

"Yeah. But why don't we all meet at the softball field in the park? West bleachers okay? We can watch the Jaycees shoot the fireworks up close. Nine-thirty?"

"It's a date."

"And maybe we can get together before then."

The four of us hopped back in the '61 Fairlane. Keith sat in the back seat and kneaded the fat on his chin, trying to make a permanent, superhero-style cleft. (A futile attempt, but he hadn't asked for my

advice.) Mom remarked about how meaningful Jenkins' sermon was; I said "yeah" but wished she hadn't reminded me. We went to Rowlands' Buffet for brunch.

While Keith was taking his time in the rest room trying to comb his hair a la Green Lantern, I alluded to the situation: "Don't ask me to go into detail . . . Keith seems kinda withdrawn . . . Mom, maybe you could cook up some of his favorite dishes this week . . . Dad, you've been looking for the right time to invite him to spend a morning surveying with you. . . ." Mom and Dad pressed me to be specific but I clammed up; they got the message just the same and said they'd take care of things. I wanted to believe they could.

Just before Keith came back, Mom said that we wouldn't be going to Grandpa and Grandma Conway's in Colwyntown till after the Fourth, the weekend. She and Dad were down after I told them I had to do pasteups Saturday and maybe Sunday at the T.D.

"Will you be coming back here after you graduate?" Dad asked.

"In a way I'd like to. But I don't think the town would really take to me very well, if you understand. I get along okay in the summers, but . . . you know. I'd come back to visit, though."

"I understand. Then, we'll see even less of you than we do now." The three of us were real quiet for a few secs. "Time flies."

"Come on, Dad--"

"You do what you do well," Mom said. "But is this what you really want to do?"

"I don't know."

"You never have, right?"

"No, Mom, I never have."

Green Lant--I mean, Mr. Liber--I mean, Keith got back just in time, and we went through the line.

Tuesday was the first of the month. I didn't have to be at work till a quarter to eleven. Keith was going swimming, and we figured we'd travel together for a ways. I went to his room to get him. He was still wrapping his trunks in his towel, and I scanned some more of the furnishings: Chicago Cubs pennant, Superboy model by Aurora, tennis racket, pinup of the TV Green Hornet and Kato.

We headed west together for a few blocks, he pedalling slowly, I walking. If June had been an outdoor refrigerator, July was going to be a boiler room. It was already eighty-seven, and the humidity was as high as Timothy Leary. The sunlight wrapped everything in a yellow haze like that which surrounded heroes just after they'd charged up their strength-imparting armor.

"Glad you've gotten that Mr. Liberty stuff out of your head," I said hopefully.

"Been meaning to talk with you about that, Kirby. My moment is at hand. You know that sneaky-looking Jarod Williams who heads the Jaycees this year?"

"He's a stinker. What about him?"

"He's gonna be in charge of the display Friday night. Even gonna shoot the really big ones off himself at finale time. Now, Williams looks

and dresses just like a villain I've been reading about. I've concluded that he plans to sabotage the fireworks display."

We were at a corner and we stopped. "You've totally flipped. This superhero business has turned you into an absolute psychotic."

"And Mr. Liberty will make his debut to the world just as Jarod steps up to sabotage the finale."

I shook my fist at him. "You listen here. You'll be in a shipload of trouble if you do any such thing. There's a war goin' on out here in the real world. And there's already twenty-fifth anniversary observances starting up for World War II. Folks in this old coal-town catch you in that perverted Great Seal of the U.S., they'll crucify you so bad that even working in Dad's office will look like a picnic."

"No sweat, Kirb. Mr. Liberty is international. His symbols are those of plenty of countries--"

"Shut up. If you don't give me that Hallowe'en getup by Thursday night, I'll tell the old man on you, lickety-split."

"No you won't."

"Don't you sass me! You spend too much time alone." I thought for an instant of myself, sitting in my room at night, then of LaDonna Price, packing a little bit every day for her big move.

"Yeah, alone, reading those--"

"All superheroes are loners, Kirby. And I'm no different. None of the other kids ever wanted me around."

"Is it any wonder? You talk about every situation like it was a comic-book plot. You're not a child anymore, Keith--stop feeling sorry for yourself."

Keith looked at the sidewalk; he fumbled with his rolled-up towel and moved the front wheel of the Stingray back and forth. Somebody drove slowly past in a '62 Impala with the windows down; the radio was on, and from inside echoed "Laughing" by The Guess Who, the really good part about the best years having already come and left. The homes in this neighborhood were late-'50-ish, summery. A few blocks away, the silver-blue water tower rose high above the oaks and silver maples, its top glowing against the rich royal-blue sky. Fuchsias hung on the porches of several houses near where we stood. Locust trees and small maples swayed youthfully in front yards for as far west as I could see.

"To be delicate about it, Keith, your imagination is overly fertile."

He looked up and smiled. "Better than being sterile."

My brother took his bike over the curb, into the street; he looked over his shoulder and waved. I waved back, then he rode south, out of sight, down one of those free, green boulevards of summer.

Keith's favorite dishes weren't mine, so I found reasons to work late and have my suppers at Briley's Café. I met LaDonna there Wednesday night, when I actually did have to go back and stay real late proofing galleys and printing photos.

Briley's was one of those places that had an Alamo-shaped juke-box in each booth. LaDonna and I ate in the one that'd been my favorite to drink

cherry Cokes in during senior year. She nodded sympathetically when I said I didn't know whether to tell the folks how far Keith's dreaminess had taken him.

"How far has it taken him, Kirby?"

"Oh, he talks about that stuff a lot. . . ." I decided not to tell her just yet about the costume.

"The four of you have a solid family structure, though. That'll help him snap out of this eventually, I think."

"Unless something bad happens first."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's all set . . . he's all right, I mean." I couldn't even tell Donna about Keith's strategy for the Fourth. I felt like Alfred the butler, not able to reveal to even his family what Bruce Wayne did after dark.

"How do you like journalism, Kirby? What do you plan to do with it?"

I lit up a filter spin. "I don't know. Maybe I've only chosen it since I can't be what I really want to."

"What's that?"

"I shouldn't have said what I just did. Forget it, okay?"

"You shouldn't smoke," she said quite earnestly. "You wouldn't believe some of the pulmonary cases I saw at University Hosp--"

"I needed you around about ten years ago. I guess what I meant a sec ago was . . . well, L.D., there's gotta be more to life than just getting a job you kinda like, and getting paunchy and wrinkled before you know it. Follow me?" Our chicken-fried steaks should've been up by then.

She leaned forward and folded her hands on the table. "Kirby, you just have to be in touch with yourself enough to choose something you more than 'kinda like,' something you won't get flabby and haggard at before your time. And if you do get old at it, a life that makes you say, 'No matter--it's been fun getting here.' Follow me?"

I hung the last print to dry at five after two and locked up the T.D. office ten minutes after that. The time-and-temperature indicator at the Owensburg State Bank had long since been turned off till morning, but it must've still been seventy-five or so. I unbuttoned my shirt as I walked down the main drag toward home. The Rialto Theater was dark, all the restaurants and drive-ins had closed, even Briley's and the bars sat empty. I thought of hoofing out to the swimming pool but realized that it too would be shut down for the night.

The traffic lights flashed yellow on Owens Avenue, red at the east-west intersections. Somebody honked from a northbound Impala, the same '62 that had gone past Keith and me on Tuesday. Its windows were down again, and as I waved at whoever was inside, I recognized Chris Montez' rendition of "Call Me" coming from the cruising Chevy's radio. The car moved through the intersection just as the piano solo started, and I stopped in front of the Ben Franklin store.

Who would call me, my fingers stained with White Out, and ask for my help at two-twenty a.m.? Keith and the folks were asleep, LaDonna had probably gone to bed hours earlier, my other friends from high school were married or gone. There was nobody around, no niche with my name on it.

Back on the home front, Mom had done her bit to help Keith, and Dad was able to let him observe some surveying and a steetpaving job later that Thursday morning. By dinnertime Keith was reading fewer comics per hour, talking superhero-ese minimally, and generally looking like his mind and body were in the same time-space continuum. I didn't even see a need to enforce my Thursday-night deadline for surrender of the uniform--costume, I mean.

Friday night came before I knew it. Keith and the folks had eaten late in the afternoon and left some stuff for me to grab after I took pictures at the tractor pull; they'd gone to Art-in-the-Park and the horseshoe pitch, and were due back at eight-thirty or so to clean up before heading back to the park for the fireworks. Alone in the house at eight-fifteen, I went to Keith's room.

I looked at the scaled plans he'd drawn of futuristic homes and office-buildings, proudly framed by Dad and Mom and mounted on the wall. On the bed lay a comic with cover art by Neal Adams, who would later go on to do work in advertising. The kid's Batman model--which Mom, for pete's sake, had helped him paint--gleamed in the evening sunlight on the far corner of his dresser. Right then I wished I'd have gotten a Batman T-shirt when they were "in" toward the end of my senior year.

I pulled the Mr. Liberty paraphernalia from under the bed. Good thing Mom hadn't run the sweeper in there lately. I wiped the dust bunnies off the outfit and looked it over; it probably wouldn't have fit me. Keith and the folks would be back soon. I decided to lock the uniform--hammer, helmet, and all--in my cedar chest. Just in case.

I was starting to turn the key when the phone rang. LaDonna, I hoped. I bounded down the stairs and picked up the receiver.

"Still on, Evans?"

"You know it, L.D."

"How are things with Liberty Valance or whatever he calls himself?"

"No problem. He even had a getup to shock the world with tonight, but I think he thought better of the affair."

"Oh no," she giggled. "Enjoy it. 'Fore you know it, he'll be deciding whether he needs to go to college. And talking about girls."

"Yeah. To be sure, though, I hid his outfit safe in my cedar chest."

"Clever boy."

After I'd hung up, I saw myself in a cape, mask, and green-orange-and-purple tights, near death after saving the town from Jarod Williams' Machiavellian scheme for pyrotechnic destruction, and receiving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from Nurse Price, her hair long and full, just like Linda Stirling's.

My frère cadet wouldn't spend the rest of his summer filing boring papers, multiplying five-digit sums, and emptying ashtrays at the city engineer's office. He could go on swimming, playing ball, inhaling RC and Pizza Spins, and dreaming.

I made sure I had my smokes, the rolls of film to drop off at the Times-Democrat, and--just in case--a loaded 35mm Nikon. I remembered to leave the back door unlocked for Keith and the folks, then headed for the newspaper office, from there to hit the park.

With nightfall came a soft breeze that stroked the skin like a nylon blanket. Pine and spruce thrived in the park, and their needles sneaked into my sandals and dug into my toes like tiny tooth-picks. Some Haight-Ashbury types had set up stereos and amplifiers; the bass sent vibrations through my ribs and sternum--sounds from Zager and Evans, The Youngbloods, Buffalo Springfield. Old men guffawed, mothers scolded, toddlers squealed. Car horns barked, hot rods rumbled like adenoidal road-graders. Cruising or already parked were '52 Ford pickups, '57 Belairs, '62 Galaxies, police and sherrif's vehicles. Peace officers strolled along the edge of the asphalt road with their nightsticks, while men and women in Civil Defense uniforms popped up here and there. Young people milled about in cutoff jeans and baseball undershirts with colored sleeves. A few of the longhairs wore red bandanas as headbands; up close, their eyes were glazed, the irises melted into the corneas. Frisbees and wiffle balls flew across the few open spaces and glowed under the glare of the big lights as if radioactive. Guys and gals of all ages huddled at the Sno-Cone booth, their summertime treats looking more like frosted '50s-vintage Christmas-tree bulbs that somebody had stuck into paper cups. A few families were toasting marshmallows, and the smell reminded me of the aroma in Grandma Conway's kitchen after she'd baked an angel food cake. But stronger, wafting from everywhere, were the tongue-wringing scents of frankfurters and Polish sausages being grilled, hot mustard, and warm, spongy buns. All Berwyn County and then some must've been there in Founders' Park at our town's version of Woodstock--the Fifth Annual Owensburg Old-Time Fourth of July Celebration.

The five of us rendezvoused at the west bleachers of the softball diamond. Once the big show got underway, the biggest thrill for me wasn't being a mere fifty yards from the launchers but standing next to L.D. I was also fired up at the thought of having saved Keith from hopping on his personal booby-trapped V-1 and from being sent à la Captain America into suspended animation. About three quarters of the way through the display, Keith told us that he wanted to go around by the fire engines and see the finale from a different vantage-point. His musette bag from the surplus store was slung over his shoulder, I noticed just then. Dad said "sure," that everybody knew where the car was in case there was a bottleneck after the show.

True, the day would come for even folks in Owensburg to worry about kids getting abducted by strangers they did or didn't talk to. But we were in a decade when drone planes were still called "V-1s" instead of "cruise missiles," when nobody concerned themselves over the nitrates, refined flour, or sodium bi-whatever in those hot foods whose scents drifted all through the park. I mean, those years had their own troubles; what did we know or care about the far-off life after The Second Golden Age of Comics?

Time for the finale. That stinker Jarod Williams, smirking like he was getting ready to shoot somebody, stalked to the launcher at the center of the diamond. I got a smoke out and stuck it in my mouth, then started to pull a match from the book. All of a sudden I heard "Look!" and "Who's that?" and "Oh brother!" Somebody had gotten past the barricades.

Running toward the launcher was a stocky, fairly short figure wearing . . . wearing a helmet and a star-studded red-white-and-blue outfit!

The O.G. nearly fell from my lips. "M-mercy."

Donna was nudging my arm. "Kirby, is that--?"

"It's Mr. Liberty!" I yelled.

About ten heads turned my way, and a score of eyes glared at me like those of wild cats, each eye hissing

Kirby

"Kirby?"

"Kirby!" First Mom then LaDonna. "You told me you locked it up."

I felt in my pocket. The trunk, the key, the phone ringing, L.D. I'd left the key in the lock of the cedar chest!

I cocked the advance-lever of the Nikon, opened the lens-ring all the way, set the shutter-speed at one five-hundredths of a sec. Just as Jarod Williams grasped the release-mechanism of the launcher and as the figure started swinging his hammer high overhead, I framed the show-stealer in the viewfinder. I steadied the long lens on Donna's shoulder and squeezed the shutter-release. The distance was great, the focal length three hundred millimeters or more: the foreground and background of the scene would be eliminated; only the crisp, frozen image of Mr. Liberty would endure.

I was climbing over the ropes, flashing my press card to a madly gesticulating officer Howell. A second cop, whom I couldn't see very well on account of the glare of the ground-level floodlights, held my brother

at bay. A few feet from them, Jarod Williams stood with his hands on his hips, shaking his head.

I jumped between Jarod and the policeman restraining Keith. "Police brutality! What's wrong with you--can't you see he's a superhero?"

The officer holding Keith looked at him rather than me, and hollered, "He's gonna get a super talking-to!"

"Let him go. He's Mr. Liberty!"

"Who cares if he's everybody's Uncle Sam?" That stinker Jarod had gotten in the act. "Let's yank that thing off his head and see who he is."

"You can't!" I tugged with both arms against Howell, who'd come over and put his hand on Keith's shoulder. "It'd be a violation of his constitutional rights."

The other cop smirked at me and twirled his stick; I recognized him then as Officer Thomas. His son had come home from Asia underneath a U.S. flag.

"Learn that in a cowards'-law course at the big university, Evans?"

"I read it once in a Daredevil comic."

Jarod and the fuzz looked at me like I was next on the loony list.

"Of my brother's, that is."

I didn't mean to do it to him; the words kind of jumped out.

Howell said: "These are Meredith and Betty's boys. The younger one's in my girl's grade; he's a comic-book nut."

Two firemen, Jarod, and a few other Jaycees set about finishing the display. Howell and Thomas led the masked man away, over the barricades,

into the Civil Defense tent. I woke up and trotted behind, the Nikon, still somehow strapped to my shoulder, striking my ribs.

It sounded like half the crowd was chanting Mis-ter LIB-er-ty, Mis-ter LIB-er-ty, the other laughing, booing, and Bronx-cheering. I ducked into the tent as the authorities hustled him into a makeshift room at the center. . . .

. . . Seated in the middle of the makeshift room, alone, erect and square-shouldered on an orange-crate, unmasked, was Mr. Liberty.

He saw me with his peripheral vision and gave a slow salute, then he let his arm drop.

I stood beside him, about a yard away. Our eyes didn't meet.

"Sorry things turned out this way," I said.

"Forget it, friend. They couldn't have been any different."

I pulled out my pack and offered him a filter spin. Like the last cigarette just before facing the rifles. He declined with a wave. I'd forgotten that superheroes, as a rule, didn't smoke.

"Someday I'll be able to laugh about this whole summer, Kirb."

I lit up. "I got a shot of you--in action. I never did get a picture last Saturday like I said I would. Figured I owed you that."

We still didn't look at each other. "You could've told Mom and Dad, you could've torn this uniform right off my back, but you wouldn't. And you were never one to leave a key in a lock."

I inhaled a deep, not-so-healthy one. "I didn't want to hurt you, or embarrass you in front of the folks."

We looked at each other, and he chuckled. "Deep down, you didn't want me to snap outa this did you?"

"Deep down, I wanted there to be a Mr. Liberty."

"Mom and Dad will be in here any minute now."

"They're already in the tent. Dad's yackin' with one o' the C.D. guys he knows. I can stay in here when he and Mom come."

"That's okay. I can talk with 'em alone."

We both looked down. "Up to you, Mr. . . . Keith."

I went up to my brother and put my hand on his shoulder. He turned his head away, probably so I wouldn't hear him sniffing. I was glad, because I look yucky when my lip starts to quiver and curl.

Dad's voice sounded in the entryway like advancing artillery must.

"Keith."

Like a special-edition comic magazine, the career of Mr. Liberty was one-shot: 4 July 1969.

We all slept real late the next day. Mom and Dad didn't say any more till early afternoon, but then they said a lot. They said a little to me, too. They turned off the comics, maybe something they should've done a long time earlier. They gathered all his comics and related paraphernalia, much of them and it collectors' items, and burned the stuff. The Mr. Liberty uniform went to the family museum in the attic. Keith would spend the rest of the summer in the Negative Zone--at the city engineer's office; any free time would be strictly supervised and scheduled, "constructive." Come fall, Keith would make school his A-1

priority, and next would come organized activities at the 'Y'; leisure hours would involve reading the "classics," current events, science. Right or wrong, the medicine paid off. Keith became an architect, husband, the father of two. The Mr. Liberty garb comes down on holidays, along with the photo I took, and everybody—even Keith—laughs. But we couldn't see the future that day. Even though it was Saturday, there were things to be done at Dad's office; we wouldn't go to Grandma's till Sunday. Dad and Keith went away silently after brunch; Mom dusted and vacuumed in both our rooms.

"It's stupid," I told her, "having to scramble to do pasteups on a holiday weekend. Who gives a shoot about journalism, anyway?" When she mussed my hair and asked what I was going to do with three years of journalism behind me, I looked at the crumpled Mr. Liberty uniform, forsaken in a box, waiting to be relegated to the attic. I said that if I couldn't do what I really wanted, I'd do the next best thing—go into graphic art, maybe even teach it. Mom put her arm around me and asked what I really wanted to do, and I just lit up a filter spin. Then she remembered.

So as for me on that barren Saturday afternoon, I called in sick. I shuffled to a deserted playground, and there I shot baskets by myself until late, just as I did on a shrivelled afternoon ten summers before, after my parents told me that the guy who played the fictitious Superman had ended it all with a bullet.

THE SHADOW PEOPLE

"You hear that, Jeff? Honey, wake up."

Waking up hurt like coming out of an anaesthetic.

His wife nudged him again. "Jeff."

"Did you have another nightmare, Mag?" It must've been forever ago that he'd gone to sleep.

"No. Do you hear it?"

"It's probably the air conditioner. There's nothing this time."

"Huh-uh. I switched it off about two."

They lay still. At some point, he couldn't tell exactly when, the sound became definite, describable.

Slow, deep.

Like the pumping of a liquid, thick and dark.

"I started hearing something about ten minutes before I woke you up," she whispered.

"Maybe it'll stop."

"It's a new sound, Jeff. I don't know. . . ."

He threw back the sheet. Yawning, his eyes bent on closing despite his efforts to keep them open, he fumbled in the dark till he found his trousers on the chair.

"Lights are out again," she said from the other side of the bedroom.

"If it isn't one damn thing it's six hundred," he muttered. "The wiring in this dump must be shot."

He grabbed his heavy flashlight from the nightstand, then pulled the .32 from under the bed and slipped it into his back pocket.

The flashlight cast shadows on the walls of the bedroom and hallway, shadows that reminded him of those he saw as a child when he'd wake up sick and with a fever.

The rhythmic, pumping sound grew louder.

They leaned against the bannister of the staircase leading to the third floor.

"It's coming from the tower, Jeff. The east one."

He led the way up the creaking stairway, fixing his eyes on the shaking yellow disk sent ahead by the flashlight. The throbbing noise was becoming louder, more intense and rapid.

Somewhere on the third storey they came to the door that shut the east turret off from the hall. He flashed the light onto the ornate handle.

"We forgot the key," she said.

He shined the light against her face. "The door's already open, Maggie." She was pinching the tiny St. Jude medal that hung from her neck on a chain.

He kicked the door; the pulsating noise drowned out whatever sound the door made when it banged against the curving wall inside the turret-room.

Moonlight filtered through the ogival stained-glass window high at the top of the turret.

"It's coming from inside there, Jeff, from inside the chest." She pointed to the antique cedar chest, not much larger than a child's coffin, in the center of the tiny room.

Kuh-thump, kuh-THUMP, KUH-THUMP.

He threw the lid up and jumped back.

A bluish-green glow--formless, motionless--filled the turret-room.

The throbbing noise had reached its peak, and it started dwindling away as soon as he opened the chest.

For a few seconds he heard only their heavy breathing and the pulse in his own temples. But then a gurgle, followed by a rasping, echoed through the entire house.

Two hours later they sat across from each other in a window-booth at an all-night restaurant, while the desert sun rose on the eastern fringe of the valley.

She drank coffee, diluted with skim milk. He poured more beer into his glass.

"I'll call the chancery and ask for the morning off," he said. "Tell Spivak I--"

"Father Greg."

"--tell Spivak I have to take care of some wiring problems at the house. Maybe I'll say I'm sick."

"Kane," she said, "I think it's time we told him, or somebody, the real reason. Don't you?"

He looked toward her eyes but saw beneath them only the gray half-moons, tinged with purple, that didn't used to be there.

Maggie awoke but her husband kept on sleeping. She curled up next to him, holding back the urge to stroke him. She turned her head--slowly, so as not to awaken him and to avoid a spasm in her back--and glanced at the clock on the tall oak chest of drawers. They still hadn't slept enough.

The late-afternoon breeze brought through the window screen the aromas of the first evening meals in their early stages, the sounds of radio news and of people getting home from the eight-to-four. She wondered if the doors downstairs were locked, then remembered seeing Jeff lock the back door; she'd taken care of the front door, as she also did each night. It would soon be night again, but maybe tonight they could escape it. The high, sloping cathedral-style ceiling of their bedroom harbored shadows even during the day, in a mimicry of the way the concrete, asphalt, and caliche held heat until the very early morning. She thought for a minute about the similar ability of the mind to retain pain even after a dozen years or more, and she felt for a few seconds like crying. Her lower back started to ache; she shifted her weight in the bed in a quick attempt to avoid a spasm. Maggie was sorry yet relieved when Jeff opened his eyes.

. . . Jeff Kane had been dreaming of standing alone before the three-storey house. Even in the starless night of his dream he made out the blend of Gothic, Romanesque, and early New England styles, the twin brick turrets, the hexagonal and ogival stained glass. The five-sided

structure had beckoned, waited, its spider-like front porch jutting and spreading out, the batwinged gables of its windowed attic pointing toward the moon and gray clouds. A rarity for the Southwest, deviating from its single-storey, desert- and pueblo-style neighbors, the wreck had vexed him even in his dream.

He opened his eyes. Daylight made the shadows bearable. Morning, he thought calmly; they'd actually made it through the night without a blast from an "electronic watchdog," without him reaching for the .32. As if they, or the door-jams and dead-bolt locks, could do any good.

"Afternoon, sleepy."

He turned his head at the sound.

"That's right. It's not morning, is it, Mag? We had another wild night." Kane made a fist and swore. "I think of the time all this jackassin' around burns! Time that could be spent doing things for you, myself, toward my work." He looked at the ceiling and squinted against a quarter-century montage of people and events holding him back.

"Sleep any, Mag?"

"Some. I know you did."

Rich, at times like these masculine, her voice made him look away from the abrasive ceiling, to find her eyes again.

Kane relaxed his fist. "I just plain died."

"Figuratively."

"Smarty. But you need sleep as much as I do."

They said nothing for a few moments; he was content listening to their breathing.

Maggie spoke.

"Honey . . . "

She kissed his chin, and he heard the wetness of her full, pale lips. She kissed the corner of his mouth, then again, next his cheek.

He tried to push her back. "Mag--"

She pressed her lips against his throat, chest, throat once more.

"Baby."

"Hey, we have to--"

She sighed painfully, tenderly. "God, Jeff, I wonder . . . I wonder if you know how much--I mean . . ."

She brought herself on top of him, slipped her hands behind his shoulders.

She felt deepest winter inside her husband give way to spring, and warm water flowed in a sparkling brook. Their eyes closed into place, and starlit brilliance overcame Gothic afternoon. The brilliancy burned itself into an ocean, emerald and surging, its saline waves pledging baptismal innocence.

She was carrying him with her to inevitable oneness with an Edenic breath. A melting shimmer of pink and green brought them to the clover and grass of a park--they were both there after being away for too long--and the brook was just over a ridge; Maggie held hands with Jeff, and they laughed as they ran across the little bridge, and the run was longer and more breathless than ever before.

Maggie Rae Dean had loved him to the limit, as if by that peak moment she could preserve him, herself, and any children against age, from decay.

She provided no home for guilt or remorse; she sensed dread and anger retreating to Jeff's unconscious like the strangers' faces he must've glimpsed two hours earlier in the waiting line at the bank.

. . . Kane stroked his wife's left hand as she ran it through his hair, wavy and auburn, which he'd always considered effeminate but which didn't matter to her. Kane closed his eyes and felt her slowly embrace him, press herself against him; she kissed his chest once, twice, then a third time.

He pulled himself away and in the same motion tried to push her back, but the sheen of her slip and the fragrance of her hair drained the vigor from his arms.

She breathed deeply; her breath came out gradually, patiently to his ears. He opened his eyes and saw her trying to smile. He set his gaze on the ceiling.

"You said something last night about your back hurting, Mag."

"It was then. Not now."

When he was twelve, Jeff Kane had an imaginary lover named Kristine. She had an English accent. In his dreams she'd become his wife. Like Maggie, Kristine was almost a year older than him. Mag was a little taller and maybe not quite as pretty; she carried just a little excess body fat. Otherwise they were look-alikes. He'd have to tell Maggie someday how much she reminded him of Kristine. Or was it all in his---?

"What's botherin' you, Jeff?"

He almost laughed. "The walls in this joint act like they'll cut your throat at night, and you ask me—"

She giggled but became serious. "Aside from that."

"You know."

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Did I say I was afraid of anything?" He looked her in the eye but saw those dark circles--why wouldn't they go back where they'd come from?

Maggie drew away this time, but she moved back after a few seconds. She pulled the sheet up around their shoulders, then stroked his cheek.

"Don't, Mag."

Again she seemed to try to smile. "You're still scared, aren't you, hon?"

"We ought to turn the air conditioner on. It's that time of day."

"You dread being a father don't you?"

A distant neighbor called her kids to dinner in a Black American accent.

"We're supposed to meet Trovalane pretty soon, aren't we Maggie?"

"We meet Father Harold at seven, at the Wyatt's Cafeteria in North Midtown Mall. Please don't change the subject."

He opened his eyes and gazed at the ceiling once more.

"Jeff, I'll be thirty come November. I've been waiting eighteen years."

The cue of her voice quickened his pulse, called up images of the June after third grade--sleeping till mid-morning, going outside with the big German shepherd to smell the wet, pink peonies while his breakfast food was soaking.

"Yeah, Maggie, but--"

Maggie wrapped her arms around his shoulders and back. "I need to see you in a child, Jeff. I need to see myself—" she kissed his chest "--myself too."

Kane ran his fingers through her hair, not quite wavy, brown like the skin of a toasted almond, with streaks of white that bespoke youth rather than aging. He pulled himself away from her.

"I need one. You need a baby too, Jeff. We need one to stay young."

Crazy, he thought: lying here with the woman whose memory kept him awake for so many nights after the first time he'd seen her in a church in downtown Chicago; her now offering all the paradise he wanted on a silver platter, and him cowering from it.

He rolled sideways. "We should be getting ready, don't you think, Maggie?"

"It's only five-thirty."

"I ought to shower, though. And you'll want to primp up some."

She was silent for several seconds. "We'll talk more later."

With no energy to do anything else while he waited for Maggie to finish fixing her hair, Kane went to the big desk they shared in the first-floor den and scanned the copies of the résumé and application letter that'd merited (maybe "warranted" was a better word) his selection as the Coordinator for Broadcasting for the newest and largest Roman Catholic diocese in the state.

Bachelor's Drake 1979: journalism and supporting work in broadcasting; two years Italian, one German; dual conclaves of 1978 "kindled my enthusiasm for our Catholic heritage," led to change of

international-relations minor to history, modern European. Reporter with Des Moines weekly The Catholic Mirror July-October 1979. Area correspondent and later production-assistant for Our Sunday Visitor December 1979-January 1981. Early 1981, compiled detailed chronology of IRS-U.S. Catholic Conference dispute over political activity of tax-exempt groups. Intern at National Catholic News Service, Washington, April-July 1981. Eleven months with Rome bureau; accompanied papal entourage on Portugal trip that included second assassination attempt, covered historic visit to Britain firsthand for NC. Summer 1982, travelled among Washington, Chicago, New York, helping implement USCC's Catholic Television Network. Married Maggie Rae Dean April 1983. Scripted catechetical audiovisuals for ACTA Foundation, Chicago, November 1982-October 1983. Graduate study Marquette spring 1984. Edited videotape in Des Moines for diocesan input to "Real to Reel" TV magazine through May 1985.

Kane flung the vita and letter aside. They must've impressed Bishop Phillip O'Donnell, Paulist Father Greg Spivak--on loan to the diocese since 1980 as media director--and Father Harold Trovalane, acting chancellor since the first of July. His Excellency had deemed 1985 the year to launch the diocese into electronic communications, and John Fabian Kane, according to Trovalane, had struck the three clerics as more qualified than "any existing staff."

Kane and his wife (who Spivak first suspected, he'd admitted to Kane, of being pro-choice since she used her maiden name) had moved into "the castle," the longtime diocesan possession they were now paying a low

monthly rent for. "The castle" was the lone survivor in that neighborhood of the many showplaces that ninety years earlier had boasted of the fortunes of the valley's founding commercial barons; now it sat in a mostly Black and Hispanic "transitional" area in the central city.

Maggie drove her small Ford, the couple's only car. "Who's this Father Tramontane again, and why is it he's suited to look into . . . the trouble we've been having?"

"TRO-va-lane--an anglicization of Tro-va-LA-nay--takes over as permanent chancellor the first of September. He's been a priest here twenty-five years or more and the associate pastor at some parish west of us since I don't know when. Now, you're the one who called Spivak behind my back while I was on the way to work at eleven. He asked the bishop what could be done. O'Donnell thought that Trovalane, as handler of business transactions and records, should look into this thing with our 'castle.' Trovalane called you while I was editing tape, and Spivak told me I could leave at two. The bishop figures Trovalane will find this more to his liking than strictly financial matters. See, he's teed off at the bishop since O'Donnell won't let him get a master's at Aquinas Institute in St. Louis; Trovalane's interested in healing--like Father McDonough and Father De Grandis."

"I've heard of them," Maggie said as she left the freeway on Exit 13B.

. . . Father Harold's Latin decorum kept Maggie uneasy all through dinner; instead of talking about the matter at hand he asked all kinds of questions--mostly harmless ones, she knew--about herself. She told him

she was from the Chicago area, and had met Jeff there while he was working on the CTN project and she as a part-time floor-manager at a TV station. Father Harold seemed quite concerned when he found out she'd held a similar job at the NBC affiliate in Des Moines until May and was still trying to break into directing.

"Sounds great," he'd said gently, "but that's a high aim for a woman, especially one with no formal education in the field."

Maggie wondered if the absence of a diamond was the reason for Father Harold's frequent glances at her double-banded ring. She saw no point in telling him she and Jeff preferred the simplicity of an unadorned band at this time. For a few minutes she feared he looked down on her since she'd converted to Catholicism just five years earlier, and then only after first considering becoming an Episcopalian. But Father Harold appeared to be impressed at the news she'd received her instructions from the Claretians, who maintained the St. Jude Shrine in Chicago.

"Wonderful intercessor, that Jude," Father had said. "Some scholars think he's a third cousin of Our Lord, you know."

So by dinner's end Maggie had taken his bearing--occasional curtness, frequent backward lean of the head, at times suspicious expression--to indicate not prejudice, hostility, or clanishness. His was only the way of so many peoples--Mediterranean, South American, even East Indian--whose cultures stemmed in some way from that of the ancient Greeks, the manner used to deal with somebody they simply didn't know very well yet. Jeff might've had the degree and the travel, but she'd lived most of her life in a city of four million.

A rough spot did come for Maggie when Father Harold had asked about their families.

"It's mainly just me," Jeff had said, "and my folks and Grandpa and Grandma Brewer."

"Do you have a large family, Margaret?"

"Just 'Maggie,' Father. Pretty much the same with me."

The priest had smiled: "You have a Grandpa and Grandma Brewer too? Intriguing."

She'd looked at Jeff but instead of finding his eyes had suddenly felt his hand grip hers.

"No, I didn't mean that," she'd laughed nervously. "My dad's folks are gone too, but I have plenty of cousins, aunts, uncles." Please, Jeff, don't let him ask me any more about . . . ; but please, Father Harold, make me tell just a little. . . .

After dinner the priest stretched out his long legs and indulged in coffee and cigarettes; Maggie and Kane each had a cigarette and sipped ice water.

"What can you tell us about 'the castle' that might be relevant to what's been happening," Kane asked, "and about the people who lived in it before us?"

"Nothing," said Trovalane, "that'd put the place in line for the stuff you two are worried about; as for the house itself, I couldn't tell you anything you probably don't already know. The diocese we used to be part of acquired the property after World War II from an estate. The last occupant was an old widower who went to Mass every morning--Phil O'Donnell

was assistant pastor there at Resurrection when the guy passed away. He died a natural death and didn't have a foe in the world. Diocesan steering committees have been trying to convert 'the castle' into an apartment house for the disadvantaged since the mid '50s. But somebody always worried about us being accused of selective rental; later on a few people wondered whether a cult or radical group might sue the diocese if we refused to rent the place to them. So nobody's lived there for nearly forty years, though one diocese or another has maintained it."

"Fairly well," Kane said dryly.

"And," Trovalane added with a smile, running his fingers through the little remaining black hair on the top of his head, "to our knowledge no one was ever murdered there."

"Father," Maggie asked, "what do you think of . . . restless souls, infestation by evil spirits, those things?"

"Ghosts, hauntings? What do you think of them?"

"All Kane and I know is there's something about this house of yours--or ours--that needs a spiritual--you know, religious--approach. So I finally called Father Spivak and was up front with him."

Trovalane inhaled deeply of his cigarette. "Why haven't you taken this to Geraldo Portillo? You're in his parish. Gerry may not speak the best of English, but I'm sure he could offer--"

"We're not even registered there yet," Kane replied. "New people coming with a weird story like ours, even about the diocese's house--he'd think we were kooks."

"Your only real contacts with the local church right now, then, are us at the chancery. Anyway, I've heard bits and pieces from the bishop and Father Greg. Why don't you two tell me what's been going on?"

"Last night was different, Father. It didn't fit the pattern." Maggie closed her eyes and put her hand against her forehead.

Jeff took over and filled Father Harold in on what'd happened the night before. Jeff blinked forcefully, repeatedly, as he did so much anymore.

"This makes the third day I've taken off in less than three weeks. I'm afraid Spivak'll think I'm a bum. But we haven't wanted to tell anybody---"

"I understand, Jeff. And Spivak does too now. But Maggie mentioned a 'pattern'?"

Maggie opened her eyes, and she and Kane told how everything had started their third night in the house, that the previous night had marked the sixth incident. They told of being awakened about one o'clock by an awareness of what they called a "presence." Kane's "electronic watchdogs," door-alarms, which they'd begun using after their second interrupted night, would go off in a few minutes, but only after a moment or two of total silence. Once they'd check the house over and get back to sleep, about two-thirty, they'd hear knocking.

Trovalane leaned forward at knocking. "Uh-huh . . . "

He nodded frequently as he listened to how the couple had traced the knocking to the closet in their bedroom the first night and twice to a closet on the third floor, but had been unable to pinpoint it the fourth

and fifth times. The sounds had stopped when they'd gone inside the closets--the second one having not even a mousetrap inside--but had kept up for ten minutes or so when Maggie and Kane couldn't trace them.

Maggie and Kane had also traced crying noises three times. The sobbing would start in shortly before dawn. A few moments later would come moaning--"like somebody in a recovery room after a bad operation," as Kane put it. Soon they'd hear the wailing. When Kane said the word wailing, Maggie closed her eyes and brought her hand to her forehead again.

"It's like a banshee or some damn such thing," Kane said.

The first time it was coming from the east wall of the empty bedroom on the second floor, the second and third times from the far corner of the den. They couldn't tell if the crying was of a man, woman, or child; but at each spot they'd traced it to there was a hazy glow that disappeared when they walked toward it, a cross between the fumes of the colored-smoke bombs people used to see around the Fourth of July and matte-colorization sometimes used in video production for special effects.

"Or like the glow that'd come from a radioactive mould," said Kane, "if there is such a thing."

"The times we couldn't track it down, the wailing kept up until dawn." Maggie uncovered her forehead and opened her eyes.

A waiter brought more coffee and water. Kane put his cigarette out and Trovalane lit himself another.

"But last night," the priest said, "broke from the 'pattern.' Things started happening after midnight? August the fifth--should this be a special date?"

"The whole affair is getting to be a colossal pain in the butt," Kane said quickly.

"Like having a kid wake you up on the hour for burping, huh?" laughed Trovalane. "Uh . . . have you ever read Wieland, an early-American Gothic novel?"

"Years ago," said Maggie; Kane shook his head.

"In that book a trickster used ventriloquism and primitive optical effects to convince a family their house was haunted. Now, a vacant place in a deteriorating part of a city would be a cheap boarding house for a lot of urban squatters. . . ."

"No, Father, something . . . else is going on."

Soon Maggie nudged Kane, and he picked up the check.

A twilight breeze rolled a sagebrush across the far end of the parking lot as the trio chatted briefly outside the cafeteria. Kane believed for an instant the lot was the world, and he, Mag, and the priest were the only people who hadn't gone into hiding.

He kicked a mutilated bottle-cap. "To answer your question," he said to Trovalane, "the Sun Belt takes getting used to--laissez-faire, tough law-and-order approach to social problems; the infrastructure is dilapidated if you ask me; you hit jackrabbit country while you're still in city limits, and three blocks past the line it's Coyoteville."

Trovalane pulled his toothpick from his mouth. "I know, and I've been here forty years, off and on. The winters aren't bad, though."

"The weather should help my back. I've had trouble for quite a few years."

Kane noticed Trovalane's eyes grow wide when Maggie mentioned her back.

"Again," the priest asked as they walked toward their cars, "do you believe in hauntings?"

"Do you?" Kane asked.

Trovalane flicked the toothpick to the concrete. "Let's find out."

The streetlight at the end of the block made the three-storey house stand out as a silhouette against the starless plum-colored sky. Trovalane parked his car in the driveway behind Kane and Maggie's. He put his black jacket on and pulled his sacramental bag from the front seat.

"I hope," he said as Kane led the way up the front sidewalk, "this isn't like that rectory in Illinois I read about in an NC dispatch--where a pastor's ghost is supposed to appear."

Kane unlocked the door and they entered. The foyer opened into a high-ceilinged salon with filigreed partitions at either side. A Romanesque arch on the left could usher them from the living room down a corridor; a right turn in the salon would take them up a winding stairwell, the two visible landings of which each ensconced a stained-glass Gothic window; an oil portrait, possibly of the wife or daughter of an early owner, hung on the wall of the stairway between the ground floor and first landing.

Trovalane walked the entire house with them--even the attic, dirt-floored and cobweb-blanketed cellar, both tower-rooms. Kane and Maggie showed him the places where they'd heard the wailing and rapping, seen the glow. The priest asked if they'd ever in any way practiced the occult; if they believed in astrology, numerology, fortune-telling; if their belongings included artifacts of uncertain origin--brooches, rings, old bottles, charms. He asked if they'd entered matrimony in a state of grace, if they received the sacraments regularly, observed the laws of the Church. The couple answered no to the first set of questions, yes to the second.

Trovalane helped them slit open a dusty moving box. The three of them retrieved a crucifix, portrait of the Sacred Heart, two blessed candles. Maggie kept apologizing for not getting around to unpacking the seemingly nonessential sacramentals, but the priest told her not to worry. He sprinkled with holy water the doors leading from outside, down the cellar, into the bedrooms, quoting to Kane and Maggie afterward key words to the Rite for Providing Holy Water from The Roman Ritual:

May all evil fancies of the foul fiend, his malice
and cunning, be driven afar from the place where
you are sprinkled. And let every unclean spirit
be repulsed by Him who is coming to judge both
the living and the dead. . . .

They followed the same Ritual for the Blessing of a Home (diocesan ownership of the house was in Trovalane's view no automatic guarantee that any deacon or priest had ever blessed it), invoking peace and angelic

protection for the house and all dwelling in it. Trovalane next blessed their bedroom:

Lord, bless this bridal chamber, that those who share it may abide in your peace. . . .

Finally, he, Kane, and Maggie joined hands and recited the Lord's Prayer, then the Memorare; Trovalane asked the intercession of Irenaeus, patron of his parish, reminding Kane and Maggie of the saint's affirmation that God's glory is the human person fully alive.

"Father," Maggie asked, "should the house be, well, you know, exorcised?"

Trovalane smiled. "The Church reserves those jobs for priests who are holier, wiser, and—I feel good saying this—older than this humble servant. But something tells me there's another way to handle whatever problem you might have here."

Maggie and Kane looked at each other, then back at Trovalane.

Soon after he'd left, Maggie Dean and Jeff Kane cleaned up and went to bed. If restless souls or infernal spirits prowled about, the couple embraced sleep too unreservedly to be aware of them; Maggie Dean and Jeff Kane were alive, they felt God dwelling within them, and the angels and saints kept watch through the velvet night.

The next week passed quickly for Maggie. She mailed some résumés and interviewed at two television stations, but she spent her days mostly cleaning and furnishing the rooms they'd decided to use of the too-big

house, getting better acquainted with nearby shopping areas, and learning which parts of the neighborhood to avoid. She shared Jeff's satisfaction at finally obtaining the cheapest available downlink dish for tapping into Mother Angelica's signal out of Birmingham, and at starting a feasibility study to find if the diocese could set up its own uplink equipment. He joined her in a few landscaping projects around the foundation of "the castle"; under her direction he took care of other chores, including putting up wood panelling in two rooms. They edited several videocassettes for use by the diocesan education office. The pastor himself registered them after the second weekday Mass they attended at Resurrection Parish; he signed Jeff up for Sunday-morning nursery service twice a month, Maggie for one afternoon per month of driving the St. Vincent de Paul Society van ("Will not hurt your back--the gear-shift is on the steering column, you'll have a partner to do the unloading."). She and Jeff got interested in velvet paintings, and started their collection with six after a weekend of searching out the parking lots of the right convenience stores, service stations, and shopping plazas; Father Harold called once and said velvet paintings were the last thing a couple should decorate a spooky mansion with.

Maggie was going through the mail late in the afternoon, eight days after Father Harold's blessing of the house. Jeff's mom had sent a card and stuck a note inside.

Aug 10

Dear Maggie,

Just a quick "hi" to see how you and Jeff are coming along. All settled? Hope Jeff likes the new job. You found anything yet?

I'm writing to you only since, as you know, Jim and I are back near the top of Jeff's dirt-list. What's more, Jeff gets owly anymore about the time his birthday rolls around. This up-and-down, friendly-then-angry pattern is going to cause him trouble, we're afraid.

Jim and I know how much Jeff wanted to go back to Europe after CTN got going and you two were married. But his decision, and yours too, Maggie, to stay in the States has meant a lot to us these past few years, to Jeff's dad especially. We didn't tell you earlier, but Jim went in for an angiogram right after you and Jeff moved, and they found more scar tissue from the '82 coronary than even Dr. Brannon had suspected. Jim's in no danger, but he's happy Jeff's fairly close, just in case.

We'll call when your not-so-better half snaps out of his latest "period." Meantime, give him a birthday hug for his dad and me (but don't tell him who it's from till it's safe).

By the way, Maggie, the Marianists (the Our Lady of the Snows people) sent me a request form for Masses. Let me know if you and Jeff have any intentions--what about your back?--would you like me to have them remember Joni?

My quick "hi" is getting low on the page. Don't either of you work too hard. You might write now that you aren't living out of moving boxes anymore, or better yet call. Happy Feast of the Assumption.

Shalom,
LaDena

Maggie stuck the card and note into the back pocket of her jeans. She felt guilty for not keeping in touch with Jim and Dena, and her own folks, but she and Jeff had had so much. Besides, what would they have told their parents?

. . . As she finished drying the supper dishes and he balanced their checkbook at the kitchen table, Maggie complimented Kane on the job he'd done installing new light switches.

"Thanks. Long as the electrician didn't find any wiring problems, I couldn't see waiting on the switches."

"Figure we'll be here long, Kane?"

He set the checkbook aside. "I hope to spend a couple days this week talking with a Father Somebody at a Franciscan institute on the east edge of the valley; he's got an idea for the diocese to replace its one-camera method of video production with a multi-cam setup. Whatever turns up, I imagine His Excellency's broadcasting program should be on its feet in a year. After that, I'm not sure. Don't you have a say in this too?"

Maggie took a chair across from him at the table. "This house is awful big for just two."

"Tell me about it. The diocese should've made apartments out of it long ago. Thinking of taking in roomers?"

"Jeff, don't you think we ought to start, well, considering a family? I mean, we've been married two and a half years now."

Kane went and stood in the archway leading into the shadowy hall. "I want what you want, Mag. But not yet. I still . . . " He turned away.

"Say it, Jeff. I can take it."

"I still hurt too much."

He heard his wife move her chair on the wooden floor so she could turn toward him.

"I know, but let go of the hurt. Give the past a decent burial. I hurt too. But I've got you. That's what matters. We can handle--"

He faced her. "Mag, there were so many things I wanted to do . . . maybe I can squeeze some of them in while there's time. Then I can worry about kids."

Maggie fiddled with the checkbook. "You've accomplished a heck of a lot already if you ask me."

His pulse quickened. "I've gotten a taste of what I want, Maggie. That's all. I want that same life for you too, and kids when we have them. Later."

He started to leave, but she stood up and had him come back to the table. She giggled and brushed the hair from his eyes.

"Not that cliché this time, Maggie. Don't tell me to take my mask off."

Her voice was serious but she kept on smiling. "Which one? You wear so many."

"I don't know what the face underneath any of them would look like."

"Let's find out together."

Jeff Kane closed his eyes for maybe two seconds. Nine summers earlier that same parental stare and tone had stung first like a hornet, then a yellowjacket: You'll never do any good in the world as a police detective, Jeff; why, you'd associate with the lowest kind of people . . . She's right, Jeff; you make a try for that line of work and you'll be nothing but a prison guard before you know it.

"Look, Maggie--no more about kids, all right? Had I wanted to raise goats I never would've left my old man's farm."

"Don't talk that way, Kane," she said as he headed for the living room. "They're humans. . . ."

He spun around. "Work was a grind today. You're the last one I need to--"

"Sorry. I just thought you were ready for one of the things marriage is all about."

He was in the archway again. "You oughta sell fertility drugs at Planned Parenthood conventions."

"You lousy sonofabitch. That's got to be the lowest remark I've ever heard from you."

"Watch how you talk about my old lady," he called from the living room.

"Shut up, Kane. I'm your old lady now! And stop being a hypocrite--you've called her a lot worse, and usually behind her back. Of course you're such a super-Catholic with the bishop and all the priests you work with. Ever tell 'em about the divorce proceedings early last year, while you were off to conquer the world with your silly degree in mass com and poli sci or whatever? Maybe we should've gone ahead and split up then."

Kane was already stomping up the stairs.

"Oh, another thing, Mr. Man-of-the-World Reporter--you don't need to worry about me trapping you into fatherhood for a couple weeks; it's not--"

He bellowed at her from the second landing. "As it is now you have to pop eight Advil a day on account of your back--how would you fare if we had a kid to take care of?"

Kane lay in bed alone, in total darkness, for he didn't know how long. No fire in hell, he thought. Only frigid, totally dark aloneness, being wrapped into a ball inside a cubicle too cramped for you to lift your head or even move your arms. No sound except that of your own sighs, nobody to speak to or hear; no chance to make up to the people you hurt, to say you're sorry.

Whenever Maggie got in bed, she did so stiffly, jerkily, and Kane knew how much pain her lower back was giving her. One look at her face had told him that remark from the landing had been eviscerating. Maybe her life would've turned out better if they had gone through with the divorce. But she was the woman he'd married, for Christ's sake--so why couldn't he humble himself and tell her to have a good sleep, embrace her and absorb the pain, stammer out an "I'm sorry"? He prayed they'd both still be alive in the morning so he could make up somehow and start over.

Had he slept any? If so, the quiet had woke him up. It was like the black and absolute stillness that comes just before the break of a July storm in the Midwest. Dark and unspeakable, something palpable sneered beyond the walls of the bedroom like an influenzal delerium. Though Maggie lay next to him, Jeff Kane felt alone up against the presence. His chest and back were suddenly wet, but he nearly shivered.

Deeeep. The bed shook, his side first, then Maggie's. They'd gone back to setting the door-alarms, for security reasons. Deeeep.

"Mag," he whispered.

"Yeah. I'm up and on my way."

Kane grabbed his slacks and heavy black flashlight. "Wait--let me go first."

"Hurry."

"Don't move too fast, Mag--your back."

"I'll be OK."

He slipped the revolver into his pants pocket just before he reached the light switch.

"Bloody things are out again."

He tried the hall light, and Maggie flicked the switch for the bulb at the landing, but the only illumination came from his flashlight. They went down to the first floor as quickly as was safe on the creaky staircase.

Deeeep! The cry of the alarm at the front door tore into Kane's eardrums like an ice pick before he finally deactivated the thing.

"God, I hate the sound of these!"

But the silenced alarms didn't mean quiet. Rapping--rhythmic, menacing--echoed through the house.

Kane gripped the flashlight till it seemed his finger joints would snap.

"Try the porch light, Kane."

It too was dead.

Kane and Maggie bumped in the darkness till they traced the rapping sound to the third-floor closet to which they'd traced it the second and third nights.

Kane pushed the door open and flooded the interior with the beam from his flashlight. The rapping stopped.

Kane took one deep breath, then came the sound of someone else's breathing, but not Maggie's. The breathing was heavy, angry; it didn't come from the walls or floors, from above or below them, yet it seemed to come from everywhere.

"Now it sounds like it's coming from downstairs," Kane whispered after several minutes.

By the time they stepped into the kitchen, the breathing had become as loud as the rain that lashes against a window during a thunderstorm. But suddenly it ended, and the couple stood still for a moment in the dark. Kane heard only his and Maggie's quick breathing, the blood throbbing in his temples, and the distant, continual ticking of the antique clock in the salon. The clock chimed—a quarter before the hour.

"Do you hear that, Mag?"

"The clock?"

"No, that." He gripped her arm but didn't hear her suck her teeth in pain.

"I don't hear anything else."

"You can't help but hear it." He went to the cellar door.

He flashed the beam against her face, making it look like a featureless Hallowe'en mask in front of a candle.

"It's coming from down here," he said as she got one of the holy candles from the cupboard. He deactivated the alarm on the knob of the back door and pulled the door-jam loose. "Stay here, Mag. I'll take the jam and the flashlight."

But she came to his side. The flame danced, flickered, then surged. "I still can't hear anything. Neither of us should be alone."

Kane opened the cellar door.

"Take this." He pushed the revolver into her free hand.

"Jeff, please don't--"

Kane stepped off the last step and onto the dirt floor. The beam from his flashlight guided him as he answered the call, the call. Cobwebs got in his eyes, mouth; the musty odor, unusual in this arid climate, made him think he'd swallowed his tongue.

He came to the door of what had once been a produce-storage room. He shone the light on the knob. He heard nothing but the call.

Jeff Kane took hold of the knob; he pulled the door open. The call vibrated like a chord sustained on a hundred organs. He raised the flashlight.

His cry was little more than a gasp by the time he could bring it up. He saw nothing after that, for he dropped the flashlight and lifted the door-jam with both hands. He didn't hear the call anymore, only banging and repeated crashes as he swung with every ounce of his strength.

A familiar call this time--Maggie's: "Jeff! Honey, where are you? What's wrong?"

The flame from her candle broke the darkness. She came to him as he crouched against the wall next to the storage-room door. She set the revolver on the floor and pulled him close to her with her free arm. He lay against her, panting, exhausted; he was so cold, she so warm.

. . . The electricity came back a few minutes after she'd gotten Jeff upstairs. They sat in the living room, drinking coffee and half-listening to the TV, for nearly an hour. Maggie's foot stung from the splinter that'd gone into it when she'd lost her slipper rushing down the cellar steps; she needed to treat it with peroxide and a needle, but she hadn't wanted to leave Jeff alone. He finally started to talk, a little past three-thirty.

"Something kept calling my name," he said slowly, head down. "My full name. Telling me to come down, that now was the time. I opened the storage-room door, and there was that green glow. I started to step inside, and the voice spoke my name again, just my name. And that voice was like . . . it was like . . . "

He closed his eyes and shook his head. Maggie put her arm on his shoulder. She took a deep breath, then pulled his head against her chest. He was still so cold.

"I raised my flashlight. I only saw it standing there for a second, if even that long. Mag, it had the most . . . most maniacal, demonic grin I've ever seen. And the face was decayed, like it's been dead for years and lying in the mud."

"Was it a . . . a woman, honey? A man?"

"A man," Jeff whispered. "I only saw him for an instant, but I recognized him."

"Who was he?"

"Me, Mag, me."

"Anyway, Father, Maggie went to the branch library on Navajo Lane and found out about a fungus that grows in rotting wood, causing a blue-green glow. So we asked a professor from the university to make a special trip up and look the house over. She came yesterday afternoon; we paid her for it too."

Trovalane pulled a Marlboro from his crumpled pack. "What sort of fungus is it?"

"Honey-Tuft. But none of the places where we've seen the glow has any rotting wood."

Trovalane took his time lighting the cigarette, and as he did Kane noted some of the things on the priest's desk: two books on the healing of memories by the Linn brothers, a figurine of St. Francis of Assisi, cassettes on physical healing by Father Ralph DiOrio and Redemptorist Father Edward McDonough, framed photos of an elderly couple who looked like his parents, a framed and velvet-mounted Purple Heart with a tag beneath it stamped "1951," and a newsletter from a Benedictine monastery known for its seminars on holistic spirituality.

"Does the front or back door appear to have been broken into?"

Kane shook his head.

"Figure somebody's getting in the basement, and setting off 'Fido' by leaving through the front door?"

"Basement windows have bars on 'em, you know that. Just like a dungeon."

"'The castle' the only place that's been having outages in that part of town?"

"I talked with a few neighbors. You know how utility services are in this county--the juice is always on the fritz; so sure, their power goes out from time to time too. At any rate, Father Spivak told me that Sagebrush Productions right downtown has super-sensitive video cameras and decks. So I made a date to ride home with their chief techno and set up some of their stuff."

Trovalane loosened his collar and took a drag on his cigarette. "A week ago Monday at the restaurant you said the wailing was like a banshee's. That's an odd simile for an Englishman to use."

Kane laughed and leaned forward in his chair. "Bite your tongue. Way back, Kane was some ungodly sounding Gaelic thing. But the pronunciation was pretty much as it is now when great-great-Grandpa Sean emigrated after our Civil War, only he spelled it with an e-a. He anglicized the spelling so's not to get mixed up with the Keenes; the sound was most important."

"Interesting. So you're no relation to the c-a-i Cains?"

"Their name signifies a descendant of somebody with a warrior's name; ours means actual 'descendant of the warrior.'"

The priest smiled. "So what are you warring against?"

Kane pushed himself back a little from Trovalane's desk. "Don't get me wrong: I'm committed to diocesan involvement in electronic media, and Father Spivak and I aren't having problems anymore. But I'd rather be back in Europe covering Church-state relations for NC or some other Catholic agency. Malta really interests me; a left-wing takeover is a real possibility there—"

Trovalane tapped his cigarette against the ashtray. "Then why aren't you in Europe?"

Kane gave him the reasons. He didn't tell him the latest news from his parents since Maggie hadn't yet shown him Dena Kane's note.

"Till things improve, right, Jeff?"

"If they do. I'd be too old by then to attain a lot of my professional goals anyway."

Trovalane grunted and crossed his legs. "When I was your age I'd been ordained one year. I'm still accomplishing my 'professional goals.' Don't feed me that . . . but why should this family situation make you so angry?"

Jeff Kane told of his earliest memories—parents arguing a lot, him feeling powerless and making spiteful gestures to convince himself he was in control of his life, the 1960 move to the farm that nobody except his dad was in favor of, and not being allowed to go far from the house because of rabid animals, old buildings, and country prowlers.

"My parents and grandparents had to do a fair amount of remodeling on the old house. Once when we were all there, Mom and Grandma Brewer had Dad and Grandpa make a circular enclosure with snow fence. While

everybody else worked on the outside of the house, I stayed cooped up so I wouldn't 'run off and get hurt.' I asked Grandpa to let me out, but he just laughed and said I should be having fun inside my little corral."

He recalled going into town to visit his grandparents, but never being able to play as late as the kids in the neighborhood: "home"--five miles from town, at the end of a long curving lane--always had to be reached by dark.

"By the time I started school, I must've hated everybody."

He told Trovalane of what seemed like the collapse of his world the summer before eighth grade---drifting apart from his one close buddy from town, the start of Dad's emotional problems and more frequent scenes between Mom and Dad, learning he'd have to wear corrective shoes for a couple of years.

"Thank God my folks got me to a doctor who caught the problem, but a thirteen-year-old doesn't usually see things that way."

Kane stood up and looked out Trovalane's window. "We went to Florida that summer to visit cousins. They were having their troubles too. Mom and Dad made it clear on our way home that we wouldn't be visiting them for a long time, that we wouldn't be going anywhere for quite a while on account of family problems. They were so stern, preachy about it, like I was a goddam sinner for even wishing things could be different. When the fall of '69 rolled around, I was one angry bastard."

"Wrapped up in self-pity too."

"I don't want to talk about high school or the first two years after, except to say my parents still weren't communicating, Dad was leading up

to his heart attack, and the few career plans I had didn't meet with their approval."

Trovalane ground his cigarette out when Kane mentioned his dad's heart attack.

"Sometimes I think I sweat out my degree only to have my parents set me inside another snow-fence corral. Yeah, that sounds hostile and irrational . . . and now Maggie wants . . . aw, I talk too much."

Kane turned toward the priest. "Something tells me Maggie's carrying quite a burden of her own around," Trovalane said, tapping one of the audiocassettes on healing.

"I gotta finish cataloguing those videotapes."

Trovalane joined Kane a few minutes later in the coffee-break room in the process of being converted into the Diocesan Film and Tape Resource Center. He poured himself a cup and leaned against the frame of the doorway.

"Greg left you alone till quitting time?"

Kane didn't look away from the row of videocassettes on the shelf. "He and His Excellency had a pressing apostolic commitment to fulfill."

"We priests in the Western Church can't have a wife and kids, so the Pope lets us adopt golf clubs instead."

Trovalane sipped some coffee. "I put a call in to a priest at Bonaventure University in New York. He's an expert in parapsychology, demonology. He can give more answers than I can. Being summer, though, it's hard telling when he'll return the call. I'll get to the point,

Jeff. I firmly believe that evil spirits are alive and healthy. They're always looking for a chance to wreak havoc, raise hell, you know?"

Kane went on cataloguing cassettes.

"Just like a virus seeks a mode of entry--a cut, lowered resistance, open pores on a windy day--so these beings try to find some crack in the wall."

Kane faced the priest. "What might the crack in the wall, the mode of entry, be?"

"Most anything: resentment maybe; bitterness; nurturing some old hurt. There again--and these are my own words, as St. Paul used to say--I wonder if these same emotions don't cause what a few years back we called 'bad vibes.' Molecules get out of kilter, people hear weird noises, alarms go off. The laws of nature are in a delicate balance; negative human emotion can be disruptive."

Kane walked over to where Trovalane was standing. "I've seen and heard enough lately not to disbelieve anything."

"Back to my first idea, though, I can't discount the possibility that malevolent nonphysical beings are the forces behind some of these disruptions. Heck of a thing to talk about on a slow Friday afternoon, huh?" He lit another cigarette.

Kane sat on the table and looked up at Trovalane. "I don't know what's real anymore."

"Our decisions are," the priest said after drinking some coffee. "We have a similar heritage, Jeff. Your ancestors kept civilization alive in the Dark Ages; Christianity might never have made it in England and on the

Continent if not for Irish evangelization. Now take my ancestry, not so far removed as yours. Sure, my mother was Sorrentine—" he made an awkward Sign of the Cross with the hand he held the cigarette in "---but Dad's a Sicilian. Nine hundred years ago Sicily was probably the most prosperous and enlightened kingdom in Europe. But both Ireland and Sicily became subjugated, exploited. The legacies? Ignorance, revenge, terrorism, bitterness; you could say both lands, and their peoples, became haunted. Even we assimilated Americans carry in our DNA these tragic memories, these . . . ghosts."

"You're speaking figuratively, of course, Father--DNA I mean."

"In that sense, yes. But you see what I'm getting at, Jeff? We can't let our lives be ruled by any cultural predisposition--real or just presumed—to bristling."

Jeff Kane rubbed the stiff whiskers on his chin and gazed past Trovalane into the office across the narrow corridor. Bad vibrations, evil spirits, modes of entry; let go . . . give the past a decent burial. Ghosts.

The screeching sound made Maggie jerk. Sooner or later something was bound to happen with her there alone.

She turned, the knife she'd been cutting vegetables with still firmly in her hand, and saw through the window a van with commercial lettering in the driveway. The opening of its side panel had made the noise.

Maggie dried her fingers on her apron and went to the back door, smiling as best she could manage.

"Hey, Deanie," said Jeff as she unlocked the screen. "Have ye no fear, Owen Hughes is here."

"Is he the guy from Sagebrush?"

"He's not a Welsh coal-mining operation come to start a uranium operation in the valley."

"Sshh. Here he comes." She straightened the green bandana that covered her hair.

Owen Hughes was slender, dapper, neatly attired, about Jeff's age; he sported a reddish brown beard nearly the color of his hair. A cigarette hung unconcernedly from one side of his small mouth. He walked quite erect and held his head at a slightly aristocratic angle.

"Pleasure to meet you, Maggie. Jeff and myself are going to set up two high-resolution Ikegami EC HDs--one in the den and another in the empty closet on the third floor, since those are the places these . . . sights and sounds have occurred most frequently so far. Now, each camera will be jacked up to a one-inch JVC deck, and my boss and I have rigged each deck to start rolling whenever there's a noise with a pitch as high as that of your door-alarms. These VTRs are specially designed to pick up infrared and ultraviolet radiation. Next to each camera, set to roll at the same pitch-cue, will be a separate audio deck, a multi-channel Dolby."

"Kane, this is gonna cost you a fortune!"

"Didn't Jeff tell you? I persuaded my boss to, uh, lend this equipment to, well, you may as well say the Roman Catholic diocese. We figure the money lost over the seven-day period can simply show as a

charitable deduction on our tax return. After all, you are our colleagues, more or less."

The two men set up the gear. Maggie worked on supper and laundry. She joined Jeff and Hughes in the den for last-minute explanations. She and Jeff seemed outside of time for the few seconds Hughes was bent over, demonstrating something irrelevant: "Let go, Jeff," she said with her lips but no sound; he touched the back of her hand and breathed so softly she barely heard, "Pace, carina."

"Can we sell you one of those gargoyles above the second-storey window, Aaron?"

"Owen. I'll decline your kind offer. But what would you take for that weird portrait on the landing up there? Do its eyes follow you?"

Maggie threw her hands up and went back to the kitchen. "Just when I'm getting back to sleeping at night, you put an idea like that in my head."

. . . In the strong afternoon light, Jeff Kane got his first good look at Owen Hughes as he helped him close up the van. Unlike the touch of white in Maggie's hair, the gray wave in Hughes' pompadour and streaks of frost in his temples made Kane think of an early autumn, like orange patches soon after Labor Day on the green tops of the highest maples. From the stress, Kane wondered as he called "thanks again" and waved, of some well-licked wound or self-imposed burden? Life--too precious a resource for such a mistake.

"Is Owen Catholic?" Maggie'd just set a bottle of beer and two glasses on the table.

". . . Oh. Claims to have been raised Episcopalian but says he leans more toward Native American pantheism--you know, God is nature."

She laid three steaming dishes down, and Kane's stomach purred.

"My life is filled with brooding Kelts," she laughed. "Why couldn't I have married that nice Korean who ran the Chiron at Channel 23?"

An hour later Kane was drying dishes while Maggie Rae washed. An oldie came over the radio, one Kane recognized from almost twenty years before; he dried the skillet leisurely, studied his wife, pondered the lyrics:

. . . And if the rain should make you blue,
you say tomorrow is anew. . . .
Life's in a hurry, but you've got no worry. . . .
Pray tell me, how all the while
you can be so mystifyingly glad;
I'm Mister Dieingly Sad. . . .

Maggie unlocked the door, and Kane carried in the two heavy sacks from the southwest-side food co-op, one in each arm, his tendons and veins bulging. She bounced into the kitchen and he tried to, singing their own parody to the theme from Ghostbusters.

"What're-we-gonna-eat?" he sang off-key.

"Spa-GHET-ti!"

"When're-we-gonna-eat?"

"Five-THIR-ty!"

Kane set the load on the counter. He dug into a sack and pulled a handfull of something out.

"'We ain't scared o' no . . . ' zucchini?!"

Mag tossed an apron over his head and stuck a vegetable scrubber into his hand. "Get to work, Aykroyd. Just 'cause this is your birthday is no reason for you to get off easy."

"I'm glad I talked Trovalane into coming. At first, when I told him about the whole-wheat pasta, mushrooms, peppers, and sunflower kernels, he said it sounded 'too Tuscan.' But when he found out about your homemade sauce, and especially the part about no meat, he knew it'd be just like the cooking he grew up on."

Maggie started chopping an onion. "Stop yakking and start fixing. We've got to eat on time if Father is going to make it back to St. 'Rennie's' for seven-thirty Mass."

"It takes five Catholics to change a light bulb," proclaimed Trovalane--in sandals, shorts, and white guayabera--as he swallowed his last spoonful of sauce. "One to do the work, and four to comprise the committee."

Maggie laughed harder than Kane did, but not as hard as Trovalane.

"My sister always hates it when I tell those kind of jokes around her kids," the priest said. "She's afraid I'll turn 'em against the Church. Can you imagine that? I think my nieces and nephews are smarter than that. Either of you have nieces or nephews? They're a blast."

"I'm an only child, remember?"

"And you've only got aunts, uncles, and cousins, Maggie, if I recall."

Maggie looked at her husband, who nodded.

"Oh, my sister had two girls. They keep my brother-in-law busy."

Trovalane pulled out his cigarettes. "Brother-in-law? I'm lost."

"My older sister died in 1975, Father."

" . . . I didn't realize." He glanced at Kane.

"It just never came up any time we talked," Kane said, looking down at the table.

"Joni was three years older. She left home the summer before I started seventh grade, to get married."

The priest nodded. "Young."

"Pregnant. Everything came at me so fast. I spent the rest of that summer riding my bike around our block, looking for somebody to play with. And Joni was married to some older guy my dad had talked about having arrested."

"Then, what happened?"

"By autumn I felt she'd betrayed me--just how I couldn't say. When she'd come to visit, I'd lock myself in my room; I refused to talk whenever she called. Holidays, I'd sit like a statue and ignore everybody. It was like I was trying to kill her by cutting myself off from her, like I felt she'd done to me. Father, can I get you some coffee?"

"No thanks, Maggie. Go ahead." He lit a cigarette.

"By the time I was in senior high, I'd gotten over the whole deal. But I'd already pushed her away. No matter how I tried to be friendly, Joni kept her distance. The damage was done. The summer after I graduated, she was diagnosed as having granuloma, Hodgkin's disease. She was dead a year later."

"And this was in '75. . . ."

"I'd always felt Joni deserted me when I needed her most. Maybe it was the other way around."

"Sorry, Maggie. I didn't see any picture that night I blessed the house. I didn't know. . . ."

After Trovalane had left and most of the clean-up was finished, Maggie went to sit alone in the near darkness of the salon. Kane stood in the corridor connecting the living room to the kitchen, observing her as he dried the skillet. She seemed to be staring through the open space in the otherwise closed curtain, into the twilight. He stepped back into the kitchen and set the skillet on the range. He returned to the salon and draped the towel around his neck. He lit a Belair; Maggie didn't respond to the flik of the lighter. He took a deep drag before walking over to her and giving her the cigarette.

"You couldn't avoid telling Tro--Father Harold about her that time." Acute-care unit, shaking heads in the corridors--what must it have been like?

She inhaled deeply of the cigarette.

He got down on one knee beside her chair. "Can you tell me about the dreams? You don't wake up crying over nothing."

She stared at the curtain. Then she closed her eyes and shook her head. She passed him the cigarette.

"What do you think about Joni when you let her into your mind?"

Maggie looked him in the eye. "She walked to school with me the day I started kindergarten. She taught me how to skip rope, and not to stick my tongue out at boys I really liked. Do I have to tell you?"

He passed her the cigarette. "Do you still love her?"

Christ, how he longed to press Maggie Rae's head against his chest, urge her to tell him all about Joni's death; to beg his wife to admit just how much she still suffered and explain why she couldn't be at peace; to get her to swear or scream or pound the wall or whatever she needed to do to be rid of the pain. But Kane knew from experience that no effort on his part would do any good, because she too was haunted.

. . . The ticking of the mausoleum-shaped clock seemed louder than usual. Maggie looked up from her reading. Eleven forty-five. The two lamps she and Jeff were using glowed like dual suns in an otherwise dark solar system. At the end of the couch, under his own sun, Jeff occupied himself with an NC Origins on legislative initiatives in Western Europe that national bishops' conferences were opposing. She went back to her reading, two books from the small library of Resurrection Parish.

In the first book she found purportedly true accounts of supernatural events. One told of a rural curate who was awakened by eerie chanting, and looked out his window to see a coffin floating slowly between the church and adjoining cemetery. Another chapter related the early-morning experience of a woman who heard someone yelling even as the

floodwaters from a nearby river moved into her yard. The woman went to her door and recognized the caller; about twenty yards from the house, as her cousin's husband; he warned her that dangerously high waters were imminent and to leave her home immediately. The woman did so, and within minutes of reaching safe ground she watched the torrent carry her house away; she soon learned that her cousin's husband had died of a heart attack during the previous night.

The lights dimmed, then resurged; Maggie saw a flash through the curtain, and a few seconds later thunder rolled somewhere in the distant hills. An August storm, she thought, rare in this part of the country, might break before dawn.

Maggie yawned and nodded. She opened the second book, a twenty-year-old edition of a Catholic dictionary. Under the entry ghost she read that the Church in no way discounts the possibility of apparitions or illusions caused by "diabolical agency"; that Catholic theology says nothing against the possibility of God permitting departed souls to come back for "some good purpose," such as to warn, give assistance, or ask for prayers.

The light from the two lamps glowed hazily. Jeff was still absorbed in his current-affairs newsletter. More thunder rumbled, God knew how many miles away.

God knows how many miles away, rain falls in a cemetery in northeastern Illinois. As always, there are no stars, no moon, only dark sky. The splattering of the rain yields to a scratching, clawing noise; the earth in front of the same gravemarker is pierced from beneath. First comes the hand, then the whole arm, finally a humanoid form, only the

outline of which can Maggie make out. In the span of seconds, the obscure form crawls out of the graveyard, across prairie and badland, through forest and wheatfield, over mountain and desert. It reaches the dirt-floored cellar of the shadowy, batlike house owned by the diocese. It drags itself up the splintery stairs, weeping; the crawling form crashes through the door, into the kitchen, and finds its way into the den, where it crouches in complete darkness, crying. Upstairs, bereft of even Jeff to comfort her, lies Maggie, having witnessed every inch of the trek, as soaked by her own sweat and tears as the rain-pummeled cemetery in Illinois.

"You're OK, carina, it's just another dream. I'm right here."

"Jeff, what's wrong? It's as dark as in the den. Why's it so dark, what happened?"

"Lightning must've hit a transformer, that's all, honey."

His hands were so warm as he patted her cheek, neck, breasts, shoulder. "I was asleep."

"That's for sure."

Her pupils had adjusted. Her husband knelt next to her.

"How long they been out? Why didn't you wake me?"

"I didn't think I should; you know what they say."

"I wonder how long—"

"You don't have to wonder anymore," Jeff said as he stood up. The lamplight cast his shadow against the curtain; the refrigerator snapped back on.

They made sure the video and audio equipment was ready to roll, checked the dead-bolt locks, and put up the door-jams. Maggie watched Jeff set his nemeses the door-alarms; their electronic eyes winked red. She double-checked the cellar door and propped a kitchen chair against it. On their way upstairs she closed the door to the den.

Maggie wasn't sure if she'd gone to sleep again, but slowly she realized she was fully awake, in bed. The presence was there. Silent, pitch-dark, impossible yet real--mocking, waiting. She knew if she peered into the hall she'd actually see it. She lay frozen in her own perspiration, barely breathing: How much longer, God, how damn much longer?

Jeff--what if he'd gone to the cellar again?

She twisted abruptly, praying he was still next to her. Her shoulder touched his chest, yet she feared to wake him, wondering if a bond might exist between--

Her sharp movement had roused him. When Jeff took the deep breath of a person awakening, the presence dissipated the way a fog clears after a warm gust. He touched her cheek.

They lay motionless and silent. A line of defense had still been broken, another intruder had entered. Her back throbbed and tears welled in her eyes, but not from any physical pain.

She didn't recognize the sobbing at first, but soon it echoed unmistakably through the house. "Let's just stay put," Jeff muttered. The sound grew louder. "Maybe it'll quit."

After a moment it did. But a few seconds later the moaning began. Jeff started to get up; she pulled him back.

"No, you were right. Let's just see if this goes away too."

Each gripped the other's arm; she stopped when she felt her nails tear into his skin. The moaning reached its peak; then, as if on cue, the wailing began.

"Enough of this crap!" He grabbed his trousers and flashlight. Maggie followed him into the dark corridor. She found the light switch in the hall.

"These lights never work!" she hissed.

Jeff turned the flashlight on, and their own hazy shadows danced on the walls as they moved toward the stairway. The oak woodwork seemed to shake with the tearful wailing.

"I'm gettin' us to a motel for tonight. Tomorrow I'm gonna talk with some of my friends with NC. A week from now we'll be in Rome or London."

Maggie straightened the strap of her slip. "You said you'd stick with this job a year, Kane. Let's get a family started first, then--"

Maggie knew even in the quarter-light that if looks were fatal she would've been a dead woman. She walked behind her husband, keeping her distance.

They reached the stairway. DEEEP!

"Yeah, yeah. It's 'Rover' this time."

Louder than ever before came knocking and laughing, sneaked in under the wailing and strident cry of the alarm.

Kane and Maggie followed the new noises to the third-floor closet.

"Sorry I glared at you that way, Mag."

The knocking and laughing stopped as soon as Kane kicked the door open. In the greater darkness of the closet, the tally light on the Ikegami camera glowed; already receding was the other, hazy green glow.

Kane pulled the cord on the ceiling switch. The light came on.

"Leave the deck running, Kane."

By the time they reached the first floor, the wailing was like that of a tornado siren; they each covered one ear against the blast from the alarm.

They passed the closed door of the den. Maggie turned on every light she could, and Kane deactivated the alarm at the back entrance.

"Now it's just the wailing," Kane said as he met her in the living room.

"And it's coming from the den." She glanced at the crucifix and plaque of the Blessed Mother above the front door.

They stood outside the den, catching their breath. Kane reached for the knob, but Maggie pushed him aside and threw the door open.

Their underwear shook in the sound waves, the glare was that of a green noontime sun. They shielded their eyes; Maggie fell back against Jeff, then stumbled into the hall.

Kane covered his ear and hurled himself into the den. He found the light switch.

Incandescence filled the den. The wailing died out in a few seconds; the glow receded to the far wall, then faded away. The only remaining glow came from the tally light on the Ikegami.

They rested against the corridor wall. The tips of their fingers touched while they panted and sweat.

Maggie, hands shaking, found the Advil in the refrigerator. Kane, leaning against the sink, facing the archway, said, "Maybe we need to pray more—together I mean."

"I don't know," said Maggie as she put the pain-killer back into the refrigerator. "Want a beer, Kane?"

"You just line three or four up on the table, and I'll take over from there."

Maggie left the kitchen without another word, to sit in the salon, Kane supposed.

He leaned against the refrigerator and gulped his beer, every so often closing his eyes and running his hand through his hair. He kept flexing his left bicep, like he hadn't done since high school when he used to get nervous or fatigued. The whine of a siren kept growing louder—the neighbors must've heard the racket and called the police. Hell, yes, let the cops and the whole blamed neighborhood come for a party; there was enough beer. He started to laugh.

He heard Maggie say something about being sorry, but she sounded further away than just the salon.

"Mag? Thought you were in the living room. Where you at?"

She bumped into Kane in the archway of the kitchen just as he was leaving. She'd come from the direction of the den.

"Where you been? You got no business wandering around this place alone."

The police sirens must've been within four or five blocks, but she simply smiled and stared past him. She had a more relaxed bearing than he'd ever seen.

But where there used to be only two or three white hairs right above her eyes, Jeff Kane now counted five.

He stroked her cheek, cool like that of a child whose fever has just broken. "Come on, carina, I'll help you pack."

Nine-thirty p.m., near-north side, Hotel Corte del Oeste, third floor. Kane held the telephone receiver and motioned for Maggie to stand close and listen in.

"Kane here. Sorry to miss your call, Owen. We must've hit the latest Sunday Mass in the metro."

"Uh, look, Jeff—I rented two hours at the most state-of-the-art suite in the 'plex—I'll bill you later. Anyway, the audio and video are the same—they don't have anything."

"Come on, Owen—"

"Sorry, man. I TBCed the video and went over it with a vectorscope; I put the audio through the equalizer bit. We've got alarms blaring and you and Maggie hollering, but that's it. No glow, no laugh, no crying."

Maggie shook her head and laughed. "Ask him about the den."

"No audio except you and Maggie yelling over the alarm; no green glow and no . . . uh, sister."

"Not even a glitch or roll? Or snow?"

"Don't make me say 'no' again, Jeff. Now, we do have Maggie saying she's sorry on the audio; and there's a real fuzzy outline of a chick who looked a lot like Maggie to me after I'd TBCed the video. Both signals clock in about four minutes and fifty seconds after the den light was switched on. That jives with the time you guys were in the corridor and kitchen before Maggie went back."

"I don't know what to say, Owen--"

"I believe you guys, Jeff. You heard and saw something."

"But nothing came across on--"

"Hey, not even a heretic such as myself would be so brazen as to claim that only the physically perceptible constitutes reality. You two better relax, catch up on your shut-eye. And talk with that preacher-man you know."

"He's coming over pretty soon. Thanks for everything, Owen. Maggie says 'thanks' too."

Ten minutes later the doorbell rang. Kane checked through the peephole and unlocked the door.

"Good efe-ning."

"Dammit, Trovalane, can't you see this is serious?"

"Simmer down, Kane. He's only trying to loosen things up. Come in, Father. Sit down."

He slapped Kane's shoulder as he stepped in. "Scusami, giovanetto. Grazie tante, Margherita--at least you're hospitable. No, Jeff, the whole thing's a comedy really."

"Then why aren't we laughing?"

Trovalane lit a cigarette and raised his index finger. "You tell me. Anyway, you've heard of St. John Vianney--the Curé of Ars? The saint claimed Satan set fire to his bed--with the cure in it. But Vianney lived a relatively long life, considering."

"Not as long as it must've seemed."

"Still hot out, Father?"

"There's a cool breeze around the hotel here, but the rest of the metro's pretty warm. And the Sunday-night 'cruisers' are making nuisances of themselves everywhere with their souped-up . . . autos. So what's new?"

Maggie and Kane filled Trovalane in on what Hughes had said. The cleric nodded soberly, taking quick puffs on his cigarette.

Kane saw after a few moments that his wife wanted to be with the priest alone, so he went down to the interior court and sat near the swimming pool, beneath the yellow moon. The ultramarine water shimmered, soft music from Stereo 97 came through the outdoor speakers.

. . . Maggie and Father Harold opened the sliding-glass door that led to the little balcony overlooking the pool area where Jeff sat.

"Kane said if the prices here seem high now I should see what they are in snowbird season."

"I'll talk with Phil about the diocese picking up some of the tab."

"Father, did you ever wake up from an awful nightmare and think, 'Thank God it was only a dream!'? And then sigh, and feel that last spike of fear melt away in the night?"

"Poetic. Sure, everybody has. Maggie, maybe you saw your sister last night, maybe not."

"It was only for a second, Father. Then she was gone again."

Maggie smiled wryly to herself. Father Harold, not Father Greg, should be the Paulist; Father Harold was going to set everything straight for her now, just like the priest-host at the end of each Insight episode.

"She died ten years ago, right? Was she hospitalized the whole year leading up to her death?"

"She went in the last time in early August."

"August 5, I bet."

"And she lasted one day shy of two weeks."

"Five plus thirteen. Last night's . . . incidents started after twelve. Today's the eighteenth, Maggie."

Maggie whirled at him.

"I don't give a damn what you preachers say about death being beautiful and all that crap! I know, I was there when her spleen and armpits were bulging, when she was white as chalk, when she was moaning and rasping. Death is the ugliest goddam thing there is, and I caused my own sister's!"

He put his hands in his pockets and kicked at the ball of fuzz on the carpet. "You're right, it is. But we're free of it--"

"Father, I'm sorry. I--"

"--and Joni's freer than we are. That's what the name of your parish is all about."

"Resurrection."

"Resurrection."

"The only thing we can say for certain is that Joni died after her immunological system failed to filter out a mutated cell. Any reason deeper than that is God's concern, not ours. Maggie, how would you define 'heaven,' 'purgatory,' or--how would you define the two?"

"Places we go when we die, I'd say."

"'Places,' you say. You probably mean light-years away."

They stepped onto the wood-floored balcony. Jeff was visible in the shadows near the pool.

"Religious folks," Father Harold continued, "don't have much problem acknowledging an afterlife. But I wonder if we don't also tend to think a deceased person no longer has anything to do with our lives."

Maggie nodded. "I've been starting to wonder the same thing, Father. Like, we figure they're dead and gone; we set up this hard-and-fast distinction between . . . oh, the temporal and eternal vales of . . . of--"

"Life."

"Life." She moved her eyes from Jeff's outline to the barely discernible mountains, almost close enough to touch, but twenty miles away.

Maggie Rae Dean bit her lip and closed her eyes. Her throat and sinuses ached. She recognized the subdued tune drifting up from the pool area, a bossa nova number that'd been around for maybe twenty years. She made out a few lines from the middle:

Flowers often cry,
but too late to find
that their beauty has been lost with their peace
of mind.

She closed her mouth tightly and swallowed hard. "Pace, carina--peace."

. . . Jeff Kane watched the swaying tops of the palm trees. He thought of his parents, possibly never to be grandparents. He recalled that summer sixteen years earlier when everything had gone wrong; he remembered the night he'd lost his temper trying to reason with his dad over some now-forgotten thing and slammed a full garbage-pail against the floor, then been forced by his dad to pick up every coffee-ground and fragment of eggshell--"Don't get the sweeper out, you young idiot, use your fingers!" A part of him had died that summer--a part he could never bring back to life, only give a decent burial to. He went over in his mind the many good things that'd happened to him in sixteen years. The people who'd hurt him, himself--was he doing them any good if he didn't try to build a house with the hundreds of good bricks still there? He too recognized the tune--how did that last line go again?

If I believed in love forever,
I'd forget the past;
You're too lovely
not to try.

. . . Maggie turned toward the priest. "Who's to say that weird noises, eerie glows don't just come from looking at that ongoing . . . life, you called it, of our . . . deceased loved ones from our

perspective--of the afterlife being in another universe. I mean, we've pushed them as far out of our lives as possible. But maybe they're not so far away."

He ground his cigarette out on the balcony floor. "Yeah. Maybe they drop in from time to time simply to say 'hi,' to encourage us, to ask for prayers, to tell us they're OK and not to have any regrets."

"Right. But their . . . oh, utterances--that we might not even hear, only feel inside--their utterances seem fearsome, ghostly, because of our mind-set. Does all this sound silly, Father? It goes against what you said to Jeff about evil forces and modes of entry."

"The things that've happened at 'the castle' might stem from both, Maggie. I can't give you definite answers; I'm not a theologian, I'm not a parapsychologist."

He put his foot against the railing and gazed westward. He reached into his pocket as if for another cigarette but apparently decided not to have one.

"I like your idea, Maggie. My dad left Palermo in '27, one reason being so his kids wouldn't grow up hearing about the catacombs of mummies. Back then, folks were still making regular visits, just like we visit cemeteries on Decoration Day."

"And here you are chasing ghosts in America," Maggie laughed.

"Yeah. But that cultic practice in Palermo gave glory to the morbid aspects of death; why not acknowledge departed loved ones in a way that gives glory to life, ongoing, resurrected life?"

As Father Harold was on his way out, Maggie wondered if she should tell him she'd made a point not to walk in front of the camera in the den. But he closed the door before she could decide.

She figured he'd get in his red Century and listen to a Father DiOrion cassette on healing while he drove home. She'd learn later that he rolled down the windows of the Buick instead and joined the cruisers on Mesa Blanca Boulevard.

Nine-twenty a.m. The racket of the housekeeping personnel in the next room came through the wall, but Kane had laid down the law about leaving the NO PERTUBAR/NE PAS DERANGER sign on the door till he and Maggie had checked out at noon. He tucked his red T-shirt in and tried to comb his hair. The open sliding-glass window let in a breeze and the splashing sounds of swimmers. Maggie stood at the window. Kane joined her.

Kane's pulse quickened when he saw the azure of the pool and the jade tops of the palms, just as it had years earlier when the 747 left the ground for Rome. Today there was a fresh shimmer to the green of the leaves, a different vibrancy to the blue of the sky, a new depth to the rustle of the breeze.

"I'm going to zip across to 7-Eleven and get a bottle of Corona. Want anything?"

She turned her head and smiled. Her breathing was congested, her cheeks red and wet.

"Just a small carton of milk, if they have any. That'll hold me over till brunch."

"Low on Advil?"

She twisted and took the bottle off the table. She opened it and looked inside.

"Three left." She snapped the cap back into place and tossed the plastic bottle out the window, and it dropped into the bushes beneath the balcony.

Jeff Kane believed and forgot. He put his arm around Maggie Rae's shoulder. From the creaky cedar chest of his past he pulled out his masks, every one of them, and threw them toward the mountains.

AWAY HELPING A FRIEND

The water tower, a soft greenish blue the last time you saw it, is now a chalky white, like dried toothpaste, but it still strikes you as an unmoving Martian invasion-machine from the cover of a paperback War of the Worlds.

Jean's with you on this humid late-May morning, and the sun, filtering through pale-cobalt clouds, puts that suggestion of yellow back into her white shoulder-length hair.

The drop-top LeMans was just two years old the last time you drove it past this tower, but you've had it twenty now. Jean doesn't mind the car's age, though, for you've kept it up well. And she likes older things, as you do, since they used to be new; she once told you so.

Two mornings ago you coaxed her out of bed at a quarter till six and served up orange juice with almost-toast and unsalted butter, while the kitchen radio brought the overnight news, then helped with the last-minute checks of the window locks and water heater, loaded her suitcase and your gym bag into the trunk, and headed down the road.

You hold your wife's hand (so what if she was sixty-four last month and you'll turn sixty-two in less than seven weeks--what if Abraham and Sarah had thought they were too old?) as you walk through the meadow-green grass of the neighborhood playing-field that adjoins the fenced-in lots the water tower sits on. Two rows of barbed wire slant across the top of the fence now--all the way around, it looks like. Just as rain soaked

your jodhpurs that afternoon nearly eighteen years ago, the dew on this morning has stained your loafers, and Jean complains that the soles of her nylons and insides of her shoes are soggy.

She complained fifty-some hours earlier on her way from the bathroom to the kitchen, the same way she used to whine when Gary and Kathy and Connie were little, on mornings you'd coax the four of them out of bed at five-thirty and serve up orange juice mixed with Hi-C and charred-in-places white bread painted with Welch's Grape Jelly, as the kitchen radio would bring the six-o'clock news from the Indianapolis station, and while you'd help with the last-minute checks, load the suitcases and clothes on hangers in the LeMans, and nod with satisfaction as all those late-to-go-to-bed grumblers would get ready to head down the road with you for that once-a-year vacation.

The kids and their mom are born bitches, but you don't mind; that's what made taking care of them as sick children kind of comic, and has made holding her in the night beyond regret.

The dew on the cyclone fence catches the sunlight in hundreds of tiny gems, all the same hue as the fence, the clouds. You both touch the galvanized metal. The accumulated dust and morning wetness have produced an oily grime; you take her fingers in your hand once again, then wipe it against your denim trousers.

"So this is the water tower we've heard so much about."

"Would I have brought us here otherwise?" you laugh.

"McBride, you've got as many lives as an alley cat, and three guardian angels."

"Two. One of them got killed that day." You know that Jean knows you still have nightmares about it from time to time, even though you don't mention them anymore.

The intersection lies nearly a mile west of here. You could've come that way, but you want to take her there when the day's over, when your story's finished.

"Got a story to tell you."

"Have I heard it before?" she asks.

"My stories aren't worth telling unless I've told them before.

You've heard . . . almost all of it."

You're near the outskirts of this small city. What remains of last night's low-lying fog steams upward in a refreshing vapor. There's something about early morning as spring blends into summer: the sigh that comes just before dawn is a memory, yet the air holds on to that freshness, and a man can't help but hear for miles. You came to know that a woman senses these same things once you allowed her to share her feelings with you, realized that her sighs are as fleeting as those before daybreak and in need of fostering with no less care.

The skyscraper-gray four-lane highway isn't far, and you both listen to the metallic, windy whine of cars and semis--how distant you can only wonder. With shrill-flute voices, meadow larks sing from their invisible havens. The shouts of a house-building crew sound to be coming from just a block away, but the workers are barely visible about three hundred yards to the southeast. The message on the outdoor intercom at an auto sales-lot somewhere cuts the air like the chimes of a carillon.

"Summer's on its way, Conroy."

Jean doesn't say anything, but somehow she tells you she's hungry, somehow you hear. Instead of driving past the house where the Vibetos used to live, you take her to an uptown cafe and grill, and buy her breakfast, a real breakfast: hashbrowns (honest-to-God ones--you check with the waiter--not those frozen things), scrambled eggs (what Dr. Hannan doesn't know will never upset him), cantaloupe, milk.

"Still waiting to hear that story again, McBri'."

So you spend the day telling her. By driving her past the service station, the hospital, the house where Ted and Marvel and Lance lived, the building downtown where Ted worked as a real-estate broker; by taking her to the cottage five miles from town. Jean sees the city where you spent five summer days helping a friend and his family. The day is leisurely and discursive, so you finish at that same intersection, about the same time of the late afternoon, where the rest of the story began for you back in

August 1968. Soviet tanks hadn't moved to Prague, Daley was getting Chicago decked out for his party's convention, and the victory of the Tet offensive vied for prominence in the nation's consciousness with mourning for the third Kennedy brother to fall in what seemed service of country. Richard McBride stood between the '66 LeMans and the four-pump island of the DX station, which itself couldn't have been over three years old. He stretched his arms till his shoulders cracked and muscles sang, then arched his back and stood on the balls of his feet.

"Morning there. What'll it be?"

McBride turned, squinting as he looked eastward without his sunglasses. He made out the form of a slight, athletically built young man whose short legs were covering the fifteen or twenty steps from the service-station door to the pumps as if they were only three or four.

"Morning." He was happy he hadn't been addressed as "sir." "Why don't I take about twelve with ethyl?"

McBride looked the kid over. Seventeen, give or take six months. Soiled white sneakers ("tennis shoes," he probably called them), crisp jeans inky blue with newness, a T-shirt with "Verry Interestink!" across the front, pilot's sunglasses, baseball cap. McBride wondered about the butch the cap partially concealed. On leave (taking one heck of a chance at getting caught working), just discharged, or on his way? Maybe just gearing himself up in case his number would soon be called. McBride felt like asking but decided the kid's status was his own business.

"Don't mind me saying," the attendant said without looking up, "but your windshield looks to me like you haven't seen a station since about twenty gallons ago."

"So I haven't. But it's supposed to hit the mid eighties today, and it's best to leave room during warm weather for expansion."

McBride took off his lincoln-green suit jacket and set it on the back of the passenger seat. He peered over the top of the Pontiac into the station. A rubber wedge propped the door open. The interior, seen from the sunny outdoors, looked cool, cozy, relaxing. McBride felt a little like going back to bed, but the motel room he'd left three hours earlier

was lonely, and musty—he couldn't say why—with weariness particles of guilt.

"You're Mr. McBride." The kid was getting ready to chamois the windshield. "You've got Indiana plates and a sticker from a GM dealer in Columbus. Mom and Dad have me watching out for you."

McBride walked up and extended his hand. "Then you are Vance—"

"Lance. That's all right."

"I knew you'd be here waiting for me but I wasn't expecting—"

He tossed the cloth back into the bucket and wiped his hand on his pants. "You were expecting me to be fat like Dad?"

"No," McBride said as they shook hands, "it's just that the last time I saw you, you were eight years old, sitting in front of the TV with a Mousketeers hat on. That bullet your dad stopped in Brownsville in '57—it tore through his left shoulder, didn't it?"

The kid didn't say anything for several seconds. Finally he said: "I don't know anything about a shooting in Brownsville, but he's got a one-inch scar on his thigh from Nevada in 1956. Funny thing to ask. . . ." He looked down.

"Sorry, Lance. Had to . . . check you out."

Lance smiled and released McBride's hand. "I understand. Dad's heard through the grapevine you old T-men got that you have a job that keeps you away a lot, sometimes out of the country; I'm not supposed to ask anything about it."

"You know why your dad asked me to come?"

Lance lifted the hood and went ahead with checking the oil. "Mr. McBride, things aren't--OK, Rick--things aren't good with Mom and Dad. With me either, I guess. From your cards at Christmas, and what other ex-Treasury-guys tell him, Dad figures you have a great marriage and all that. He thought . . . well, you might be able to help us. I don't know how."

McBride studied the coiled air-hose near the pump and was silent for too long a time.

The slam of the hood as Lance closed it made him look up again.

"Dad thinks a lot of you."

"He took me under his wing my first year with Treasury. It was the other way around."

"Tell you the truth, Rick, we weren't expecting you till later today. Mom works at the hospital till noon, and Dad's in his office uptown till then. He's off this afternoon, though. Give him a ring." Lance backed away from the pumps, toward the building, and McBride walked with him. "I can let you use our business phone, save you a dime."

"You off at noon too?"

Lance pulled a cigarette from a rear pocket. "I'm here till four, un-fortunately."

McBride had lunch in the hospital canteen with Edward Vibeto, Jr., and his wife, Marvel. They sat at a table in the far corner, out of the volunteer workers' earshot. They lingered over last cups of coffee.

"Do you like working in bookkeeping, Marvel?"

"I love it, Rick. I find it quite interesting. It's more than just extra income or a way to get out of the house. I feel like I'm really participating in something, functioning."

"I'd find it interesting too, Rick--getting to know who's in for what, right? And if they ever make abortion legal in this state, she'll be clued in as to who--"

"I can't say exactly what I feel part of, but . . . but--"

"I follow you, Marvel," said McBride. Ted's last remark stuck in his mind's ear: the worst kind of failure--total insulation from the signals of somebody who needed you most.

"So," he went on, "you say little La--I mean, Lance is going to be a senior? I imagine you got him all slated to start with the Bureau of Narcotics, right, Ted?"

Ted lit a Winston. "Christ, no. I have no notion what Lance plans on doing."

"I'm hoping he doesn't go to Vietnam," said Marvel.

"He ought to," Ted grunted. "Maybe that's what it'll take to put some real direction in his life."

"I thought I told you to stop talking that way."

Ted held the cigarette close to his lips. "No, you never did. Huh-uh, Rick, when Lance isn't working or helping me, he's at the library or the bookstores. On weekends he goes to movies out of town and watches them on late-night TV. Foreign ones, I guess. That's all I know about him, so don't ask me what the boy intends to get into. And when we are together, he doesn't say so I don't ask."

McBride sipped his coffee. "He's grown up to be a fine young man, I think. He looks up to both of you. He's worried too."

They gathered their cups and plates onto an empty tray.

We paid twelve thousand for this little dump a few miles east of town," Ted said. "Two acres, all told. The house'll look OK, but it needs work. That's one reason I asked you to come--nobody can do electricity like you. Just little stuff, of course; the codes are such that a licensed electrician will have to do the major wiring."

"What do you plan on doing with it--rent it out, sell it at a profit?"

"We haven't discussed any particulars," said Marvel.

McBride unbuttoned his suit jacket and followed the Vibetos out of the canteen. They walked in the hazy yellow shimmer of August across the street to the parking lot. McBride turned to admire the hospital and landscaping: sandy, four-storeyed, contemporary, constructed in three phases; Russian olive, flowering crab, and amur maple trees, and arborvitae and pfitzer juniper shrubs. State and national flags rose high above the front lawn and waved against the hopeful blue of the sky.

"How do we manage it, Rick?" Ted asked. "Both look like movie stars, I mean. I can't decide if you look more like Kirk Douglas or Darin McGavin. You must go to bed early and eat Wheaties or something."

"I saw myself as more the William Holden type." What about it, Ted?
Get to what you're avoiding.

"And me--well, I'm somewhere between Peter Lorre and Andy Devine."

"Actually, you struck me as more of a Rodney Dangerfield. But so? Those three all have more money in the bank than I ever will."

"Who exactly is it you work for now, Rick?" Marvel asked.

McBride looked toward the LeMans. "What. My organization acts in the interests of a consortium of international entities, which in turn ostensibly act in the interests of the electorates of the democracies of the Western Hemisphere."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"It's not supposed to." The noonday brightness was starting to hurt McBride's eyes; he slipped his dark glasses on, then smiled. "I couldn't tell you exactly if I wanted to."

"I'd like to hear about your work someday," said Ted.

"No, you wouldn't."

"Then helping us on this house and installing some simple wiring should be a nice break for you. I knew I'd called the right guy—"

"Ted and I are worried like Lance is, Rick. We're thinking of divorce."

"I gathered that. Talked with a counselor?"

"What do them shipbums know?" Ted was pulling out another cigarette.

"Clergyman?"

"Ted and I never have been churchgoers."

McBride faced Ted, and spoke softly. "But you called me. As if the problem were a gunrunner or dope smuggler we could close in on like ten or fifteen years ago."

Ted pushed his hat back. "I visited you and Jean in '63 and again in '65. Your life was smooth; and it still is, even with this new job you moved into."

"Ted, who do you think I am--"

"Stay with us a few days. Marvel and me, we been married going on twenty. If there's a chance--look, maybe you can tell us what seems to be missing. Something might rub off on us just from your being here."

His LeMans, McBride had to get into his LeMans.

"It's kinda hot today, Rick," Ted said as the two lounged in the Vibetos' living room in the late afternoon, he slouching in the sofa and McBride sitting nearly erect in a stuffed chair.

"I'll take you out to the farm place tonight, or better yet tomorrow. It's closer to five miles than only three or four, really."

"No hurry, Ted." McBride held a tall, sweaty tumbler of rosé and apple juice on the rocks. "Cody's a pretty town. Thanks for showing me around."

Ted set his half-finished Scotch and water on one of the inlaid end-tables. "Soon's Marvel gets done with the washing, we'll take you to the Regal Buffet."

"Lance should be back pretty soon?" McBride drank some wine and juice.

Ted stood up. "Hell, I don't know. 'Scuse me, OK? I have to use the john."

McBride wanted to help with the laundry; but Marvel had headed for the basement abruptly after Ted had ignored her reminder to use a coaster under his glass, and she'd told McBride to relax instead. The central air-conditioning cooled the room, the whole house, like a morning breeze would. The living room's furnishings were contemporary yet not trendy, for sure not fadish, in rich jades, teals, turquoises. A radio in the kitchen had been bringing the lush, flowing melodies of the Brazilian-American artists who'd introduced their New Beat nearly a decade earlier--Almeida, Getz, Gimbel, Jobim, LeGrand, the Valles, Wanderley. Through the sliding glass door, McBride saw out in the adjoining screened-in patio hanging pots of vivid fuchsia and Wandering Jews, and fig trees set solidly in wooden floor-holders.

McBride's head bobbed and his eyes closed. He relived a night from a year and a half before. He'd gotten back in town that afternoon after being "on assignment" for ten days; he hadn't slept the night before and had spent most of the time since his arrival typing up the inevitable report. Stumbling his way to bed at midnight, McBride heard whimpering and raspy breathing coming from five-year-old Kathy's room; he stepped in and found her radiator-hot. He knew it was a job for her mom, but she'd gone to bed an hour earlier, all done-in. Dr. Hannan could wait till morning, but the girl needed someone to sit with her the rest of the night. So McBride coaxed some orange-flavored aspirin down her and patted her forehead with a cool cloth. He wrapped Kathy in her blanket and carried her to her tiny stiff-backed chair. McBride sat there, knees as high as his chest, nestling his older daughter in his lap. From down the

hall came the sound of Jean's deep and dependable breathing. She nudged him seven hours later--"McBride, what's wrong with Kathleen?"--but he could only say that he must've gone to sleep. Kathy rolled over in her sleep, and her mom stroked the child's forehead and took her from McBride's arms into her own. "You haven't even taken yesterday's clothes off. Why didn't you wake me, huh?" Kathy's weight was off his lap; he moved, ached; his joints cracked. "You did a swell job; but why didn't you call me, Richie--God knows you're so tired. . . ." McBride looked up and started to say something, but he saw that Jean then realized why he hadn't woke her up. And he knew there wouldn't have been any words even if he could've found them.

"Can tell how often you have wine." Marvel was nudging him. "Let me take it--it'll spill!"

McBride laughed self-consciously, and Marvel Vibeto tsk-tsked. He didn't find her attractive, what with her long, somewhat out-of-kilter face and wrinkled, jowly cheeks; but something in her face, her bearing struck him as wifely, motherly--homey.

"Time to go, Marvel? Just stick it in the icebox if you don't mind, and I'll finish it tonight."

McBride and Marvel waited at the back door just inside the kitchen while Ted got the air conditioner going in the Monaco.

"You never really answered me at the hospital when I asked--you figure on selling this place and moving to the acreage?"

"I doubt it. But everything's up in the air, to tell the truth. Right now it's an investment, something to keep our minds off other things, for Ted more than anybody."

"Let's go demand something to eat," announced Ted from the back-porch stoop inside the garage.

"Hey, I forgot all about Vance--I mean, Lance. Isn't he gonna come?"

"Who knows when he'll be back?" said Marvel. "Besides, he can do OK on his own." There was no harshness in her voice, no lack of concern, merely matter-of-factness.

"Want to leave him a note?" McBride knew even before he'd gotten it out that he was overstepping his boundary.

Marvel seemed more surprised than anything. "What on earth for?"

Lance came from his room a few minutes before ten, while Marvel was in the kitchen ironing a dress for the next morning and Ted and McBride were comparing local property-values in the living room.

"No," McBride heard Marvel say, "I gave your gray jacket to the Salvation Army. It'd been in the garage for over a year and a half."

"I wanted to start wearing it again, Mom. Thanks a heap."

"No need to be sarcastic, Lance. It wasn't like you'd said anything to me about it. I'm no mindreader."

Ted put his glasses on to look somebody up in the city directory. McBride looked down on Ted for obviously wanting to tune out the minor incident in the kitchen, till he recalled an evening in his own kitchen four months back. He'd walked in the back door at four-thirty that

afternoon after a two-week assignment in an Andean "republic"; Jean had hugged him and laughed with the voice of a lark, and the two older kids had spent close to a half hour jumping all over him. But by dishwashing time he'd become evasive, reticent, irritable. He planned on fixing Gary's bike the next day, he'd need to change the oil in the Pontiac before long, and of course there was the bookwork that Jean had been too busy to take care of, not to mention that report. Jean prattled on about the hectic week she'd put in, and the kids—even Connie, who was three months shy of two years—wanted to hear about where he'd been and what he'd seen. He didn't feel like breaking himself, distributing himself to the four of them; how could there be enough of him to go around and still have some left over for Number One? He tossed the dish towel onto the formica countertop, sighed, and grabbed an RC from the icebox; it was just such a blamed pain to try and put those feelings and impressions into verbal signals he figured they'd all understand. What was the use?

"News time, Ted." Marvel had finished pressing her dress. Ted switched the TV on. Lance must've already gone to bed.

McBride finished his wine and apple juice from earlier. He was in bed before eleven, in the spare room at the north end of the Vibetos' house. Marvel had turned the air conditioner off, and through the open windows came the slow rumble of diesel engines, the banging of cars, as freight trains switched and coupled out at the yards, McBride didn't know how far away.

Lying in bed, McBride remembered the early '30s, not long after his family had moved from Bay Ridge in Richmond to Middle Village. Security,

that stuck out the most in his memory about those few years. Sometimes young Richie would go with Dad or Mom into Manhattan for some reason, and spend the day seeing an incredible machinery making everything for the whole city work, a machinery providing whatever he and sisters Ethel and Katy, little brother Bobby, Mom and Dad, and Grandpa Ragan needed back across the Queensboro Bridge. But come late afternoon, those downtown faces would become hard, the gray city mean, and he couldn't get home quick enough to the neighborhood, where Ceruti's Drug Store closed for a half hour every noon, where Father Crowley always went for his walk at dusk, where he could curl up in his lower bunk in their apartment above Dad's hardware store, against the wall that separated his and Bobby's room from Grandpa's, and listen to the night rain echoing on the window panes like angels' whispers, or to the trains grinding and switching out in the yards. Home, a feeling more than a place, where Richie knew their world would still be intact the next morning.

Ted and McBride left the house at nine. They passed the newish blue water tower as they rode east toward the outskirts of Cody. Soon they were on a narrow, curving, two-lane blacktop whose bumps threatened to throw the Dodge into the ditch. North of the road, parallel to and between those hungry ditches and the elevated bed of the railroad tracks, ran miles of old telephone polls. Short, weathered, tilting, they were evidently still in use, for wires connected them, and red and blue lights perched along their arms. The roughness, decay, deafness of those utility polls brought one image into McBride's mind--a miles-long stretch of

crucifixion devices from pre-Christian days; he drove the image out, but not before feeling that people still crucified but in not so stark a manner.

About two and a half miles from town, the former Treasury agents came to a cluster of houses and small stores, including a '40s-vintage filling station and an even older grain-elevator.

"This here's Harrison, Rick. Had a P.O. till around '55. I want to stop in at Harry's General and grab a Cherry Mash."

"Wonder what keeps some of these little towns going, anyway," McBride said as they walked toward the store.

"Prune juice, I 'magine."

The far wall of Harry's General displayed motor oil, tools, ammo, paint. Another wall and a couple of aisles contained bread, juices, paper plates, antacids. In a cooler along a third wall were lunch meats, eggs, beer, pop, Heath ice-cream bars. A big plastic clock above the cooler advertised Grain Belt beer.

After McBride answered for the third time he didn't need anything, Ted suggested they sit at the counter--tended by a boy, maybe fourteen--and have something to drink. On the wall, to the kid's right, the picture of a young woman whose pubes was almost covered reminded people it was August. Clipped to a wire display-rack were Beer Nuts, Planter's Peanuts, barbecue- and onion-flavored potato chips by Kitty Clover; packages of "fried pies" sat in a wire bin on the countertop. Two fans, one high on a shelf at each side of the eating area, sent currents

air down on McBride, making the loose fabric of his green polo shirt and gray work trousers dance.

"How's it goin', Ted?" the kid asked.

"They're hanging low enough for the bitch to get a good kick at 'em."

The boy looked surprised, maybe embarrassed. "She still giving you a hard time?"

"She says the word, I hit the john. We'll have water. And I'll take a Cherry Mash."

The seat of McBride's barstool was all of a sudden putting pressure on his sciatic nerve; he wanted to stand up but found himself paralyzed from somewhere deep inside.

The '50s-vintage water dispensers behind the counter had "Norris" metallically stamped on them. The water tasted metallic too.

"Tell Lance I said 'hi,'" the boy said as Ted and McBride were leaving.

"Sure thing. See you later. Ready, Rick?"

Outside, McBride slipped his sunglasses on. "Didn't think you and Marvel talked that much. And you have no intention of passing that kid's 'hi' on to Lance."

Ted lit a cigarette, a guilty look on his face.

About a half mile east of Harrison, they went past a small gantry spanning the tracks, with a LOW CLEARANCE sign. The sign had been broken, it dangled, and the girders of the traverse were mangled at both ends.

They spent the morning tearing out the wall that separated the kitchen of the seventy-year-old house from what was once the living room.

They laughed, swore, shook their heads, argued over the details about their time in the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Division of Treasury, and later in the Bureau of Narcotics: Nevada, Texas, Tennessee, Provence, Moroco, Naples—all those places, together. Ted worked in a few questions about the job McBride had started in the spring of 1966; and McBride, complimenting him on his subtlety, answered them as best he could.

"Think your better half might bring us a lunch when she gets off work?" McBride asked about noon. "With something for herself too, of course."

Ted looked at him as if the question were a joke.

"She doesn't know we're here. 'Less you told her."

Ted put a few tools in a chest in the old living room. "Don't let me forget to lock that when we leave."

"Lance told me before he went to bed that he only had to work till twelve today. Maybe he'll come out."

"He told me his schedule once. I didn't write it down or anything. You tell him we were coming?"

"He was long-gone when we got up."

"He knows the way here."

They went back to Harry's General for lunch, and had coffee with packaged roast beef and ham sandwiches. The kid had a Cubs game on the radio and didn't say much, Ted leafed through an old issue of U.S. News & World Report that somebody had left on the counter. As they ate, McBride thought some more about that evening in April.

After grabbing an RC and deciding it was too much an effort to put all his impressions into words, McBride had stepped out the back door to toss the flip-top into the garbage. He came back into the kitchen and indicted Jean, who'd assumed his role as dish-dryer.

"Uh, what gives with the eggs in the trash can?"

"Well, honey, that's what I was talking about just before you--"

"I know eggs are economical, but we can't afford to be throwing them away. I mean, where I was at only two days ago, kids are going blind 'causes they're so blamed hungry."

Jean went on drying and stacking dishes. "I know, McBride," she said gently, "but that's what I was starting to--"

"It's OK that you stock up on food. But like I've said a hundred times, if you can't eat a certain amount up within a certain time, you shouldn't buy it in the first place. We could go broke even on my salary if you keep--"

Jean slammed a plate on the table, the two oldest kids scampered into the living room. McBride felt numb inside, he started to sweat.

"Stop being so damn difficult! Third try: we had to eat out twice this week on account of me cutting my finger last week and old Mrs. Porter across the alley needing somebody to run her to the hospital this week so she could sit with her husband--he's got a tumor the size of an orange that just started to bleed, so you figure it out. I wanted to bake a cake Monday but thought I should help her instead; she's not lucky enough to have had kids like we did, you know. I wanted to fix an egg casserole on Wednesday, but didn't think I should risk contaminating any food with a

cut that really ought to have had stitches. The smell from the refrigerator practically knocked me over when I opened the door this morning. Now if you care to eat those eggs, be my guest."

Little Connie had started to cry.

"Now, Jean--"

"Seems to me you insisted I buy them before you left three weeks ago--they were marked down, of course, and now we know why. Even though I told you we already had plenty of eggs and Dr. Hannan suggested I eat fewer. But you couldn't get that through you head, Rick. You were too concerned about doing something to show how responsible you are, instead of for once opening your stick-'em-out ears. So put that in your crappy pipe and smoke it!"

She'd thrown the towel onto the formica and disappeared into the hallway, then called back, over Connie's bawling: "And make sure those dishes go in the right places."

Ted and McBride decided they'd worked in the heat enough for one day. All McBride remembered about the ride back was the antiquated Standard sign that rose high above Harrison's filling station--red, white, and blue, with a fluted torch and red flame.

Ted worked in the realty office for a couple hours that afternoon. He came to the house with a big sack from Safeway and proclaimed himself chef for the evening. He ordered Lance, who'd finished working on his '56 Ford hardtop at the far end of the garage and started reading in his room, to stick around.

While Ted fixed supper, Marvel took care of a stack of bills he'd let pile up. Lance put his reading aside and showed McBride around the nostalgia corner of the basement.

"Here's some of the junk we have to go through and decide what to do with. If I move on next year, if we go to that place east of Harrison, or if the folks . . . you know.

"Look at all this garbage, Rick. What do you think of that Hiland Potato Chip can? I bet it's twenty-five years old. Take a peek at these fan books on the Nelsons and from The Donna Reed Show. Here's one full of pix of Jerry Mathers and Tony Dow."

McBride smiled. "It's called 'Americana,' Lance."

Lance didn't seem to have heard McBride's tone. "Beg your pardon," he said touchily. "And get a load of these scrapbooks--Army photos of Dad, dozens of shots of Mom and Grandma and Grandpa at picnics or birthday parties during the Depression."

"Let's have a peek at that Fairlane of yours."

A barbell with rusty plates sat in one corner of the garage, next to an exercise bench whose padding stuck out like solidified beer-foam. The shelves held dusty Coke bottles, tarnished license plates going back to 1959, old radios. A faded U.S. flag hung on the west wall. Fastened to the other walls were cracked garden-hoses, vases stuffed with artificial flowers, outdated calendars advertising the company Ted worked for, with hunting- and fishing-scenes.

"Think you'd like to be a mechanic, Lance?" McBride asked after Ted's boy had closed the hood of the Fairlane.

"I enjoy working on cars, but it's just a hobby and part-time summer job. I'd really like to be a filmmaker."

"Interesting. In what area--industrial, educational, governmental? Commercial?"

"Not sure exactly, Rick. The documentary people turn me on. Ever seen work by Ricky Leacock? Or Fred Wiseman, John Huston, or the Canadian Film Board? What about Resnais' Night and Fog, on a concentration camp? It's stunning."

"I've seen some of Leacock's films on network TV. Didn't he serve with the Signal Corps during World War II, and work later with Flaherty--?"

"Right, the Nanook of the North guy. He was something else."

"Yeah, and I saw Huston's San Pietro once."

"I cried when I saw that."

"The Army showed us enough of Capra's Why We Fight series to last me a lifetime."

Lance looked away. "They were good too. Oh, I'm interested in avant-garde cinema. It'd be neat to make a film like Breathless. Ever seen works by Godard, another French director?"

"Like some of the others you mentioned, the name's familiar, that's all."

"At least you're halfway in the know as to what I'm aiming for. When I try telling Mom or Dad about it, they say, 'I don't know anything about that' or something along those lines, or go mum like I was talking about V.D. or a skeleton from the family closet."

"Think they're censur--uh, putting you down for wanting to be a moviemaker?"

"I don't think they understand. It's foreign to them, you know, no pun intended. When they do listen, they write what I say off real quick and say it doesn't sound very practical. So I wind up telling them I won't get into filmmaking, if that's how they feel about it."

Lance gripped the hood ornament of the Fairlane with one hand and struck the other against the fender.

"I really don't figure I'll get into anything."

"You told them that?"

"Uh-huh."

"What do they say?"

"If they even hear it, they don't give any indication."

Ted served breaded lamb chops, boiled potatoes, and wilted lettuce with bacon chunks. Marvel said little during supper and left half of her meat, poking at it while she had her after-dinner coffee.

"Not a bad supper, Dad."

"I'll say, Ted. Makes up for some of the slop when we were catching bad guys all over blazes."

"Thanks, troopers. What gives, Marv? You've been sticking to your lonesome way over there in the corner."

"I'm all right."

"Did I give you a tough piece? Wasn't it cooked enough?"

"You know I don't like lamb chops."

Her husband's face got red, his eyes narrowed, his voice quivered.

"How was I to know? I've never heard you say—"

"I never thought I had to come right out and say it. I don't ever buy lamb; that should speak for itself."

"I just assumed it had something to do with price, or time needed to fix it."

"You assumed wrong."

"Hey, Ted, I can't tell you when I last had wilted lettuce. And those potatoes were cooked just right."

"Thanks. Oh, Marvel," he said as he and she gathered the dishes, "I saved the potato water if you want it for gravy."

"I don't care what you do with it."

That night the four of them sat in the living room, following coverage of the Democratic National Convention on TV. Nobody said anything about the speeches or issues, but McBride read from their faces that each Vibeto had something in mind.

After a while Marvel went to the patio. McBride joined her a few minutes later. She was checking the soil in the pots when he slid the glass door closed behind him.

"Plants need watering?" Locusts, crickets, and night birds had gotten together somewhere for a jam session. The patio smelled wet, tropical, alive; yet it made him think of neighborhood, family, summer.

"I don't think so. My shoulder tells me we're building up for a rain."

"Same with my sciatica." The bottoms of his jodhpurs clicked and clacked on the smooth burgundy-colored bricks before he stopped a few feet from Marvel.

"I worry about Lance," she said.

McBride glanced back toward the living room. The TV glowed blue-gray even through the glass and drape.

"He seems to be in pretty fair shape, and he's good for quick bursts. But he moves slowly otherwise, and his eyes look so tired. I suppose he has to get up at six?"

"He sets his alarm for six. He's been waking up at four or four-thirty most of the summer. He can't go back to sleep. He did it off and on most of the winter too. No, Rick, I don't mean just that: he's an only child; if his dad and I break up, where will he be?"

"That's why you called old McBride on the Bat-Line--to save another marriage, 'eh? Don't break up. Too bad it isn't that simple, right?"

Marvel moved over to the door leading to the backyard. McBride put his thumb and index finger against his cheek for a moment, arranging his thoughts.

"Marriage is a contractual affair in this country," he said.

"Self-interest is all each party has to bring to a contract; that contract can be cancelled when the parties so wish."

Marvel made sure the outside door was locked. "You studied law at Columbia, didn't you?"

"I was enrolled to study it at Fordham. But some different opportunities came along the summer before I would've started. Anyway,

Ted probably told you I'm a Catholic. My religion looks at marriage pretty much as the laws in Italy or the Republic of Ireland do—not as a contract, but a covenant."

"That's just another legal term. 'Agreement,' right?"

"'Agreement' in the special sense of commitment."

"Commitment."

"A two-way promise to stick it out with the other party through thick and thin. Our country's laws don't view marriage that way anymore."

"But our society isn't comfortable with the new attitude yet, Rick. Have you ever noticed how people will say, 'I'm getting a divorce from my husband or my wife,' which is a lot less blunt than 'I'm divorcing them'?"

"Come to think of it, Marvel, you're right—a blurring effect."

Marvel switched on a small light. The shadows cast by the swaying branches of the neighbors' locust trees moved like waves across the brick floor.

"My church," McBride went on, "is only now getting into the question of what makes a marriage true and binding, real. It'll be quite a while before this new approach gets off the ground, and I don't know a lot about it. I do know the Church considers the emotional maturity of each partner at the time of marriage, whether each understood the commitment aspect, and the ability of each to freely enter into such a permanent relationship. Make sense?"

"Ted told me something a couple months ago, Rick. He remembered a day back in the spring of 1950, just before our wedding in July. He was going for a walk before supper in the same part of his town he'd lived in

almost all his life. About five blocks from his folks' house, he turned to see how far he'd come. He was on a hill, looking down on their house, that whole neighborhood, from a totally new vantage point. He told me he'd felt closed in, like life was a bus and he was missing it; he was scared and had to get away while there was still time."

"I was like that all through my twenties and early thirties--restless, feeling boxed in. I'm not sure I was over it even when Jean and me got married nine years ago." McBride sat down on one of the steel-and-vinyl lawn chairs.

Marvel turned and gazed through the screen toward the alley. "Rick, how do we know a couple has nothing going in their favor? Isn't there always hope? Oh, in some cases it's obvious the people never should've been married in the first place. But I don't feel very many marriages are that hopeless. I don't think Ted does either. Maybe we're too idealistic, though."

McBride laughed a little. "I imagine a dedicated marriage-counselor--a priest or Dr. Joyce Brothers--is like a good emergency-room surgeon: no matter how banged up or gangrenous an arm or leg is, they'll only amputate if there's no other way."

Marvel sat on the chair next to his. McBride told himself once more that she wasn't pretty, yet felt that hominess about her face, expression, bearing.

The patio light flickered, it must've had a short. McBride remembered changing the bulb on the lamp in Connie's room, the lamp with carousel figures painted on a revolving shade. He recalled how often he'd

replaced a burned-out bulb that Jean or Gary hadn't gotten around to taking care of. He thought of the times he'd replenished the tissue holder in the bathroom in the middle of the night, of the quick trips to the twenty-four-hour market for milk or Tide or cough syrup. Little things, home things.

"Rick, even if a marriage didn't have everything going for it at the time of the actual ceremony to make it true and binding--maturity, ability to make a life-long commitment--couldn't it--" she chopped at the humid air with her right hand, then paused "--couldn't it become a real marriage in time? If each partner worked at it?"

McBride didn't hear the locusts, crickets, birds anymore.

"Rick, your job--what with sensitive and classified information, and the need to be away so much--it must work against, oh, against communication with your wife and children."

"I'm not sure. Jean wonders if I don't think so and use that as an excuse for the way things are."

Marvel jerked. The shadows of the tree branches caressed her face.

"'The way things are'? Then you aren't--I mean, you came here when--"

"Things ain't peachy at my house either." He turned away and stood up.

"Rick, we didn't know, or we wouldn't have--"

He smiled. "That's because I never told you."

"This is starting to sound like a soap opera." Even in the dim light her face looked red.

"And I'm starting to sound like John Wayne. That reminds me, we're missing the big show from the Windy City."

"You just missed it, Rick," Ted said, looking away slightly from the TV. They interviewed 'that pinko' McCarthy," he laughed. "And us without our .38s."

"That isn't funny," stated Lance. "The guy who shot RFK only used a .22, an eight-shot. He hit five others, and the slug that went into Kennedy fragmented into God knows how many pieces. Sirhan got him backed against a freezer or something, and started firing point-blank while Kennedy had his hands up like a boxer. Afterward, when they tried to move him, all Bobby could say was, 'No . . . don't.' I read all about it."

"Lance is right," said Marvel.

"Sorry, I was kidding. Bad taste, about the guns and McCarthy."

Lance didn't seem to have heard. "Now that he's dead, maybe people will appreciate him."

McBride hooked his thumb in his belt and quickly studied their faces, the way the electron gun would scan the rear screen of the TV tube for phosphor dots.

Ted, Marvel, and Lance had to work the next morning. McBride slept late. He washed a mountain of dishes, took a long walk, and read for a while at the public library. He bought a short do-it-yourself book on electrical wiring at a hardware store to bone up for the job at the old house, and he drove past the Catholic church, remembering to make the Sign of the Cross when he went by, to know where it was in case he stayed over

of the Cross when he went by, to know where it was in case he stayed over the weekend. He thought of calling Jean despite the day-rates and reversing the charges, but he feared they'd get into it. So he had plenty of time alone. Through the open living-room window came the rumbling sound of switching freight-trains; the gray calls of rain crows became background music.

What was life, McBride thought shortly before noon, but relationships? Yet he viewed it as if part of somebody else's home-movie. Even when he'd imagine or recall an event, a person, the screen would be narrow, bordered by markings along the picture-frame; actors moved, smiled, cried like two-dimensional images on early 8mm. And a cinematic distance detached him from their feelings, their humanity. But they weren't images, dammit, they were people, whether your wife at the peak of love or your kids when you held your hand to them as encouragement for their first steps; they trusted you to meet their needs, not to break their spirits, and were in your hands from that special instant on. So what are you going to do with that?

McBride suggested that Lance ask for the afternoon off and the four of them work at the house in the country. At one-thirty McBride and the Vibetos were five miles east of Cody, getting out of McBride's drop-topped LeMans. They decided to tear up part of the ancient sidewalk leading to the front door, take out some dead shrubs, and dig around in the yard for rocks, bricks, old bottles; the electrical work could wait till a sunny, hotter day.

They worked for close to two hours, cracking corny jokes or grumbling over a momentary chore; but most of the sound came from passing cars, meadow larks, the Top 40 station on Lance's radio, their own scraping and digging. McBride saw the Vibetos and himself as archaeologists searching in the earth for something hidden yet near, an artifact inherent to the human; he needed time to pinpoint it, because what they sought was more than close—it was inside them.

Just before three-thirty McBride wondered what Jean and the kids were up to. A scene of Gary at Little League practice was taking shape when Ted said to Lance: "This maul doesn't quite know what it's all about exactly—at least so far as this sidewalk is concerned."

Lance smiled at his dad after a few seconds and said: "I know what you mean—you need something better for knocking that cement apart."

Ted laughed a little. "I didn't say that very well, did I?"

"That's all right," Lance said, still smiling. "If people expressed themselves lucidly, nobody'd ever understand them."

"That's a damn cynical way to talk."

McBride stopped tugging at a stubborn root.

"C'mon, Dad. Couldn't you tell I was only kidding?"

"All I heard was a highbrow monologue from some smarty-pants who reads too many books and watches weirdo movies."

"Enough, you two!" Marvel quit knocking dirt clods off a vase she'd unearthed, and she stood up.

"He was joking, Ted—" McBride could tell that Ted didn't hear. The corners of the fleshy man's mouth had dropped, his eyes narrowed. McBride had seen the look before.

"You better get your ass on straight, Lance. It's a tough world out there. You shoot your mouth off to a boss or DI, you'll be in trouble. And set your head on something real in life; God knows what's gonna happen with your mother and me—"

"Enough, I said!"

"—so you gotta wake up."

Lance flung his spade aside, spat, and stood up, shaking his head.

"Dad, you don't understand."

Ted Vibeto sprang at his son and grabbed him by the shoulders. McBride dropped his hand-shovel and poised himself to move in. But the expression on the pudgy man's face seemed no longer one of rage but pleading.

"Don't ever say that! If I don't understand, what goddam hope is there? What hope is there for any of us?"

"I think we've worked plenty for today," Marvel said shrilly. McBride was having trouble breathing, his heart pounded.

It started to look like rain when they got past Harrison, so McBride put the top up. In the closeness inside the car, he sensed that something had been released from Ted; he couldn't pick up any vibrations from Marvel. Soon Cody's water tower became into view. The rain clouds had moved on, but the overcast sky didn't change. Lance, next to McBride in the front, finally broke the silence a minute or two later.

"One of these days I'm going to climb to the top of the world, then just fly away."

At a STOP sign McBride heard the trains again from out in the yards, and the moan of the rain crow.

Marvel and Ted changed clothes as soon as they got home; she got ready to go to the grocery store, he poured himself a Scotch with 7-Up. As his mom was grabbing her keys and his dad taking his drink to the patio, Lance announced to everybody: "I'm not in my room now."

McBride, washing up in the bathroom, thought that an odd thing for even a seventeen-year-old to say, but figured he'd better worry about what his own kids might be saying in ten years or so.

"Where's Rick?"

"In here, Igmar."

"Those pistons on your LeMans sound like they're missing. Mind if I take her out for a good listen?"

McBride tossed Lance the keys. "I thought they sounded funny myself. And remember, A.J. Foyt--roll the top down."

Lance didn't grin back. "Sure thing."

McBride stuffed his sweaty green polo shirt into the laundry bag he'd brought from home, then joined Ted. He left the sliding door open behind him.

The gentle music from the FM station, the hanging plants, the blue-gray afternoon surrounding the deep-green foliage outside--they all made him think of a plantation in the Amazon or Caribbean. He was glad to be sharing the moment with Ted, but others ought to have been there.

Ted put a cigarette in his mouth, a Salem this time. "Sorry about that blow-up back on the farm."

"Those things happen."

"It embarrassed Lance. I hope I can apologize." He lit the cigarette.

"You will."

"Being discouraged, not knowing what's gonna happen—I get so tired, touchy."

McBride nodded.

"Want something to drink?"

"Later, thanks."

"Rick, there just doesn't seem to be any point in Marvel and me staying together."

"Do you have a lot of scenes, like at the farm?"

Ted took a drag. "We don't have much of anything; you told me that yesterday outside Harry's. I guess we don't have any more to share with each other."

McBride nodded again, but after a hesitation. Ted drank some Scotch and 7-Up before going on.

"About a year ago she said: 'Ted, we're going on fifty and our son's practically grown, but the only thing we can really talk about is breaking up. What's happened?'"

McBride looked through the screen at the tree branches, he as still as them.

"I went out to poke around under the hood of the Dodge. Didn't say a word."

Out in the switching yards, a diesel engine groaned, and two freights coupled with a crash like distant thunder.

"I should've seen it coming when Lance was in about ninth grade. All three of us were in the living room one night--me at my newspaper, Marv and Lance going through the atlas. 'How many countries is it you've been to again, Ted?' 'What all states you been through, Dad?' I kept my head in the paper and said something like: 'Prob'ly half of 'em, Marv; most of 'em, I guess, Lance.' Marv said, 'You must have so much to share, I never realized it before.' All I said was, 'It's a big world, that's for sure.'"

McBride rose and walked to the far side of the patio.

Ted had some more to drink. "Rick, some mornings I wake up, and the very sound of her breathing makes me . . . "

McBride glanced back over his shoulder. "Makes you what?"

Ted lowered his head and took a quick drag on his cigarette. "The sound of her breathing makes me so disgusted that I want to reach out and strangle her." He looked up and gulped the last of the Scotch and 7-Up. "There. It must hurt to hear something so rotten."

McBride turned toward the screen again. "It's only a feeling. I understand. Who can say? Maybe this . . . contempt is a good sign, that its complete opposite is waiting to break through, but an opposite whose breakthrough is being prevented by something."

"You talk like you been there."

McBride sat down in his chair again. "Sometimes Jean and me will try talking about something meaningful, but nine times out of ten we wind up disagreeing."

"Sometimes you try talking about--?" Ted let his empty glass turn sideways.

"Usually I'm not precise enough when I respond to a comment or make one of my own. Then she gets the idea I was nasty or irreverent, some such thing. Next I'm mad 'cause she's not understanding me. By that time we're both getting snotty. And when I do make it clear what I meant in the first place, she's teed off at me for making a half-baked effort to express myself to begin with."

"You--not precise enough? But didn't you major in speech, or journal--?"

"English. Minored in history."

"And at Columbia. You should be able to say things pretty clear."

"I graduated sixteen years ago."

"But, Rick, those sticky legal and diplomatic reports you have to hand in--"

"That's different, it's my work."

"I'm a fine one to talk, but why can't you make the same effort with . . . ? You know."

"Just got out of the habit, I guess, Ted."

"You don't figure it's worth the effort?"

"Maybe I don't."

McBride poured himself a small glass of orange juice. By the time he brought it back to the patio, Ted had started in on another cigarette.

"Ever throw a stone into a pond, Rick? Notice how the waves form concentric circles and move out? And eventually the circles go away? Marriage is kind of like that, wouldn't you say? The ceremony and honeymoon are like the dropping of the stone. The ripples--well, they're the years a couple has together; when those circles don't spread out anymore--that's the 'till death do you part' business. And the pond itself is . . . what should I call it? . . . eternity, I suppose.

McBride swallowed his juice slowly. "Didn't think you were church people."

Ted shook his head. "Anyway, marriage isn't limited to that Saturday afternoon in July: it keeps spreading out until the ripples stop; being married, raising a family--you have to reckon them in terms of the total picture, the whole pond." Ted had been looking down, but his eyes met McBride's.

"What's your point, Ted?"

It seemed to McBride that the T-man turned real-estate broker would cry. "Rick, I think it'd be so damn pointless for a family to fall apart--after a woman, man, kids have shared so much. So damn pointless for those waves to all of a sudden stop forming circles, as if there'd never been a stone tossed in to begin with."

McBride's glass was tilted, a few drops of juice had dripped onto his hand.

Ted stood up. "I just hope it's not too late."

McBride was finding it hard to breathe again, just like an hour earlier at the farm.

In the living room Ted said: "Lance thinks I'm awful hard on him, I know—I make him keep his hair short, be in by twelve. But he has to get himself geared up for Vietnam." He spoke with clenched fists, kneading his doughy fingers against each other.

"You want him to join up, right?"

"God, no. I don't want him to do what you and me had to. But how else is he going to learn self-discipline, come to produce for society?"

"Ted, we get no news about it back here. I pick things up from people at State and Intelligence, though. In a few years we'll see guys coming out of Southeast Asia hooked on smack like you wouldn't believe."

Ted stood up straight for a change, his eyes narrowed like they had at the acreage. "What are you driving at?"

"Lance might survive the snipers and land-mines, but he'd come back dead in another way."

Ted brandished a fresh cigarette before sticking it in his mouth.

"You telling me our boy would turn into a junkie?"

"I didn't say that. Lance is strong, Ted--sensitivity is what makes him strong. It'd be a bad joke if he lost out to what you and I fought to smash."

Ted Vibeto seemed to stumble to the front door, like his fleshy body had stopped a .33 slug. "What's Lance going to do, then?" He might've been asking the door. "To contribute?"

"He's told you and Marvel both--can't you hear?"

Ted spun around. His eyes struck out like fists. "I don't know anything about it!"

A diesel engine groaned.

They went to the kitchen. "I'm going to work at the office till supper. Care to come along?"

"I oughta lie down awhile. Thanks anyway."

Ted had hardly left when McBride wished he'd gone with him. Every now and then being alone in a house brought on a flashback to his private-eye days of a decade earlier, to the afternoon he'd stopped at the house of a police-informant and found the guy with three holes in his chest. The kick in the heart, that chill, they always came back.

His stomach rumbled. If he slept until dinner, he wouldn't feel how hungry he was.

Those same detective instincts fell in gear as he passed Lance's room. "Now, why'd he leave his door open?" He backed up and stood in the doorway. On the east wall of the bedroom hung a poster for an Italian Western. Lance's window, next to the poster, was up a few inches; through it drifted the banshee-wail of the rain crow.

McBride stepped in. A small bookcase next to the bed held boxed 8mm reductions of Hollywood and European feature-films; on top of it lay a few issues of Film Comment and Film Quarterly. The bed was--made, for crying out loud; McBride felt guilty at the memory of his habits the summer before his own senior year. Something on the bedspread rustled in the faint breeze.

McBride picked up the newspaper article. Not yet yellowed or crinkled, it looked and felt to be three or four months old; someone had clipped it neatly--not torn it. This poor joe had climbed a TV tower in California--where else?--and . . . and jumped off.

"Why would Lance be saving a thing like this?"

McBride went to Lance's desk, next to the window. Books stood in a row: Kracauer's Film Theory; Knight's The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies; Rotha's Documentary Film. McBride found an uncapped pen on a blank sheet of notebook paper. And something else--a wet ring, like it'd come from the bottom of a glass of water. He didn't see any glass, and Lance wasn't carrying one when he'd left.

He rubbed his chin. A piece of blank paper, but an uncapped Bic; a fresh water-ring on the paper, yet no glass in sight.

McBride read some more of the article. The guy in California had called to would-be rescuers that the TV tower was the top of the world and he was going to fly away to the New Byzantium.

A recollection barely in his conscious made McBride look at the globe on the wall-mounted shelf high above Lance's desk. There was something next to it--a clear plastic tumbler. Next to the world. At the top of Lance's room.

"'Top of the world'--where did somebody just say that . . . ?"

He stepped up onto Lance's chair and lifted the tumbler, nearly full of water, from the shelf. He found another piece of paper, water-ringed like the first, but with handwriting on it.

"I knew it. . . ."

Goodbye, no hope; fly away, top of the world. McBride pressed his fist into his head, trying to read beyond the words; he glanced at his watch, and sweat from his armpits flowed cold down his side.

Water, TV tower.

McBride stepped down to the floor and looked out the window, to the northeast, four blocks away and a hundred fifty feet up.

"Christ."

At first he thought he was hearing his empty stomach grumbling, or trains out in the yards.

"Holy Christ."

He was hearing thunder.

McBride grabbed Lance's twill work jacket and scrambled out the front door, leaving it open. He sprinted toward the tower; his arms churned like pistons, the insides of his jodhpurs abraded his heels. The snickers and stares of uncomprehending children merely irritated him, the uvular snarls and bared teeth of agitated dogs couldn't slow him down. Only a couple more blocks. McBride sprang from a sidewalk onto the pebbly exit of a paved alley, planning to cross the street in mid block. He flexed his left leg to spring from the grainy coating to the blacktop street.

The gravel tricked him. He tried to correct himself, but the clumsy effort only drove his right foot into the back of his left calf.

He came down prone and hard. Lance's jacket hit the asphalt first and cushioned the impact like a piece of cardboard might that between two colliding '56 Cadillacs. McBride felt sick the instant his belly slapped the street. Pain stabbed the left side of his abdomen, sweat flooded his

forehead and eyes. Something was wrong inside—how wrong, how deep? One rib was busted for sure—others? His spleen? No, not the spleen, not now, when there's a life at stake.

McBride started to get up, breathing in jerks. His lower left ribs shrieked like shattered glass. The heels of both hands, scraped white but streaked with tiny threads of scarlet, burned like he was pouring alcohol on them. Through the rip in his trousers he saw the same pinkish-white skin, tinged with red, of his stinging knee. He brought himself to the all fours the army had trained him to assume when bracing for an artillery blast. He found his way to his knees and saw that his torso was pockmarked with gravel. A welt the size of a shotgun shell had already formed under the livid flesh left of and below his sternum. He swore with clenched teeth and shaking hands, but no sound came out.

McBride put his toes, the ball of the foot, the weight of the leg against the street. Next with the other leg, to see if--no, both OK, thank God.

A few of the little kids who'd giggled at him seconds earlier were surrounding him, asking if he was all right, telling him that alley had always been a bad one.

"I think I'm OK. Thanks."

"Hey! The cops."

McBride stumbled into the street and waved his arms. The cruiser hit its brakes at the last second, and McBride bent at the driver's window—"Goin' to the water tower?"

"Get in back," said the driver.

McBride explained that he was an old friend of this kid's dad, that he'd been in town to help the family, about the note. The officer who drove, a swine-faced man whose eyes looked mean even in the rear-view mirror and through the protective screen, said he knew.

McBride took a deep breath. Pain jolted his lowest rib. "Let me talk with the boy. I got no time to explain. My name's Richard McBride. Here's my--unnnh--my wallet. There's an ID card in the safety compartment showing I'm--"

"We know," said the second officer without turning around.

Swineface pulled the cruiser up over the curb and drove across the baseball diamond adjoining the fenced-in water-tower area.

The second officer turned around. "Are you hurt, Mr. McBride?"

"Just tripped is all. We can take care of it later."

"Get out real slow, you two," mumbled swineface. "We'll take our time and move over to the fence. I knew somebody'd hop that short thing one of these days." He grabbed a battery-powered megaphone off the floor-tunnel.

McBride opened the door. Lightning struck his rib.

About fifty onlookers had gathered; some milled about on the playing field or up at the fence, and others stayed back, across the street.

Swineface spoke low as the three of them walked from the cruiser toward the tower. "Jerry, try and move 'em back. And don't let any more come onto the field. Hang tight till 18 gets here."

McBride and swineface reached the cyclone fence. A few people in the crowd asked questions, but the two ignored them. Like the coupling sound

of the freight cars, the reverberation of the thunder came from far way, yet seemed so near.

"The fire department will be here in a sec or two," swineface said.

"The kid's liable to be ravioli before they can do anything."

"They got a net. You know him pretty well, McBride? Then take this."

"Lance." McBride's own voice over the megaphone sounded like the artificial speech of someone who'd had their larynx removed. "Lance, this is Rick."

The tiny figure at the top of the world moved to the railing of the uppermost circular catwalk and leaned against it.

"You aren't in trouble, Lance, you haven't done anything wrong." The sound echoed off the tower and shuddered in the heavy air.

"Do you understand, Lance? Wave if you do."

The figure waved. The crowd droned.

"Good. Think you can climb down now?"

The figure stepped back from the protective railing, then stood still.

"Please?"

No response.

"Do you want me to come up and talk? Wave again if you do."

The figure stayed put. The crowd was silent.

"Want me to climb up?"

Lance Vibeto moved to the railing once more. A collective gasp came from the crowd; somebody shrieked, "Oh my God he's going to jump!" Lance waved. McBride handed the speaker to the mean-eyed cop.

"Help me over the fence," McBride said as he stiffly slipped into Lance's jacket.

"You're not really—"

"Give me a boost, willya?"

The officer held McBride's feet in his fleshy hands. "Don't take that coat off. The city guys who change the bulb up there say that metal retains heat even on a cloudy day."

McBride jumped up and took hold of the ladder. He thought his whole left side would burst as he pulled his feet to the first rung. He started climbing; his mind focused not on Lance, Ted, Marvel, but on Gary, Kathy, Connie, Jean, and the rib went to sleep.

Less than a minute after he'd started up, a fire truck pulled over the curb and onto the playing field; three firefighters unfurled a net—as if somebody attempting suicide would aim for a net! Thunder rumbled three or four times as McBride climbed. He stopped twice to rest, once at about fifty feet and again at the lower catwalk, about twenty feet from the top.

After ten minutes of climbing, McBride reached the uppermost catwalk. The thunder uttered another terse, restrained threat as the one-time detective left the ladder.

Lance stood about fifteen feet away, staring at the thunderhead approaching from the west.

McBride inched onto the curving surface of the mammoth tank, imagining for a split second he was on the deck of the Titanic as the ship began to sink. He wondered how many hundreds of thousands of gallons of water sat beneath them--more than those clouds carried?

"Glad you could make it, McBride." Lance now seemed to be studying the crowd--or maybe the ground. McBride wanted to rush over and grab him, but he knew he couldn't risk it.

"You took quite a fall. I saw you run here from the house. I'm sorry to cause--"

"Don't worry, Lance. It was just clumsiness--on my part, that is."

Lance finally looked at McBride. "I've never felt so much in control before."

"You're calling the shots, Lance. Nobody else in your life."

"You knew it was me up here. I didn't doubt that one of you would find my note. You were both trained to figure things out. Was it Dad, or . . . ?"

"I found it."

Lance shook his head and laughed. "The folks still got cotton in their ears, and sunglasses on in the dark."

"Your dad's worried, tired too. Same with your mom. But they love each other, they love you. So there's hope--"

"Then why can't they feel their own vibes or mine? Tell me that, Mr. Secret Agent." Lance's cheeks had reddened, his knuckles became white.

"They're having trouble . . . communicating right now, that's all."

"They can't communicate 'cause at some point they decided they wouldn't."

Lance's words soaked in the way alcohol or peroxide would a paper cut.

"Lance, you put stock in what I say, right?"

The teenager's voice broke a little, and he made a childish gesture of exasperation with both hands.

"You know I do. I've been hearing about you since I was little."

"For a long time you didn't communicate either. But you broke free by leaving us the note, by coming here. I'm sure Ted and Marv will start talking again with your help; you're the model now."

"Why should they? They didn't make the effort with each other or me when they had the chance."

"That's a fade-out, son. Tomorrow's a new reel."

"Not bad. Look! There's Dad's Monaco. That's him and Mom. They came, Rick. For me."

The crowd below seemed to have doubled despite police and firefighter attempts to keep people back. One hundred fifty feet up, the collective voice was a nauseating murmur.

"See that orange house down there, Rick, about three blocks west, with the gray roof? That car in the yard--it's a '47 Chevy, and it's sat there as long as we've lived here. Dad says it's a lawn ornament."

"Huh."

"Y'know, even though the firemen have a net, I can jump off the other side of this thing." He shook his head again and laughed.

"But you won't, Lance. You got too many things to say to the world . . . and the guts to say them. That's why you've . . . decided to live."

How much longer was it going to take? McBride tried not to look down, but the earth drew his eyes like static electricity would lint. The steel they stood on vibrated--thunder was rumbling, the blue-gray of the sky had deepened. What if lightning were to hit the blamed tower? McBride's rib gave him a sharp, stinging pain; for a few seconds he was very lightheaded.

Lance finally spoke again. "I've sure caused a hell of a lot of--hey, Rick, you're hurt."

McBride drew the jacket closed. "It's only a flesh wound, Captain."

"You're bleeding--on my jacket too. Here, let me--"

He stretched his arm out and took a step toward McBride, but lost his balance and started falling backward. A second later one leg was sticking out at an awkward angle, and he was frantically rotating both arms in an effort to regain his footing.

McBride launched himself from the curving surface, exerting every muscle and ligament from head to foot. His rib howled. He landed with a paratrooper's roll, on shoulder and hip, maybe two yards closer to, yet still several feet from, the teetering Lance. McBride slithered and humped along the slick steel surface till he was close enough to reach forward and grasp the material of the boy's full-cut work pants.

They were both on the downward curve of the dome, and gravity started pulling them further down. Lance struggled panically against McBride's attempt to yank him inward. The older man tried to shift their weight

toward the center of the dome, toward the iron base the lightning rod rose from, but no go. Like a standing person in a lifeboat, Lance Vibeto was moving them toward---

"For Chrissake, Lance, fall back on me!"

The head of a great hexagonal bolt stuck up a good two inches from the steel dome. McBride grabbed the head with his free hand, gasping at the agony in his side. He tugged on Lance's leg; McBride's weight was thus shifted and Lance hurled forward. He flew over McBride and landed within inches of the iron base, far from the railing.

But the force of Lance's movement had loosened McBride's hold on the bolt. Lance's smooth jacket worked against McBride as if it were silica; he slid, rolled, banged down the indifferent metal surface. He squeezed his eyes shut. A jar of pain, and McBride knew he'd bounced over the protective railing of the uppermost catwalk.

A freight train of realization knocked his breath away in a millionth of a second: Richard Lawrence McBride was going to die--in saving another's life he'd lost his own. A nanosecond of RAGE: so unfair--something cheating him out of life, second chances! COOL ASSESSMENT: on a high-school physics exam he'd drawn a blank on the fact that a falling body travels sixteen feet per second--yet he was remembering the answer twenty-seven years later; a hundred feet to go till--no, he should die of fright before dropping half that far, that was what they always said. MEMORY: he testified in a federal courtroom and saw six men marched away to prison; scaled a sheer cliff at midnight on the coast of France and again felt the recoil of an M-44 as viscera

exploded red and gray from inside the black tunic of a young SS; hugged two-year-old Gary John McBride at a birthday party and drove four-year-old Gary through Marion County traffic, both of them laughing, so the boy could spend the day at work with his daddy the radio announcer; strolled hand-in-hand with Kathy and Connie up to the ticket booth for the slow-moving Shetland pony ride at a summer carnival; in the crisp October of 1959 he tuned in Phil Phillips' "Sea of Love" on the radio of their motel room in upstate New York, and soon his bride from Richmond Hill held him like there was no tomorrow--Jean, Jean.

McBride opened his eyes. The ground waited far below, at the end of a tunnel whose one side shone steely blue-green and whose other hinted cloudy sky. At a thousandth of a mile per hour he was falling from the Milky Way toward a galaxy light-years distant. Yet he was plummeting faster and his reflexes would have to be even quicker.

The side of the tank gleamed dully just a few feet away--the tank?! That meant he'd only descended about fifteen feet. Still time, too many people need me. His arms shot out. In an infinitesimal fragment of a second he glimpsed the railing of the lower catwalk. Just one chance. Can't pull it off if I'm scared.

Warm steel slapped his fingers and palms, and McBride squeezed. His left hand secured the steadier grip, and it seemed the arm was being amputated at the shoulder. A rib on that side surely broke through the skin. He closed his eyes against the impulse to vomit. Life was worth at least a dislocated shoulder.

McBride dangled till he found his balance. He got a sturdy hold on the railing with his right hand, then swung that leg upward so his foot caught in the railing as well. Awkwardly, grimacing at the pain, he worked his way up and over, all the while wondering if he'd slip and lose everything. But something in the back of his mind told him life was never so absurd for those who made the often terrifying decision to go on living.

McBride crouched on the lower catwalk, leaning into the tank. He trembled. Tears and sweat streamed down his face; his breathing alternated between gasps and whimpers. His arms stung like he'd slammed a steel baseball-bat against an iron pole, the ligaments in his left shoulder had been stretched to the rending point like elastic and then set fire to, his rib throbbed with repeated hammer blows.

The din from the crowd more than a hundred feet below made McBride look downward. Clusters of people huddled together, some holding their hands to their heads, others pointing upward. Two more police cruisers had arrived and had their red lights flashing, as did the ambulance that'd pulled up onto the baseball diamond. The police held back fifty persons or more who lined the curbs of the intersecting streets.

McBride stood up. Dizzy. He leaned against the tank again. His pulse pounded in his temples like a war drum. Everything had happened so fast. It must've been just a few seconds earlier that he and Lance--Lance! What's happened between then and now? Is he . . . down there?

"McBride! You awright? McBride!" Lance, but where?

McBride tried to answer but only sobs came out. He shuffled to the railing, gripped it with both hands, and peeked upward. Lance Vibeto, with ivory face and drooping shoulders, was looking down at him.

"You OK, McBride?"

"I . . . I'll live."

"No thanks to me. Look at that commotion down there. Did I cause all that?"

There was a righteous clap of thunder, followed by raindrops, large and reproving. McBride strained to hear what the rain was saying: its words cast a partial light on that hidden yet internal something they were searching for back at the farm.

"What a guy's done ain't so important, Lance--it's what he's decided to start doing instead that counts."

"I'm coming down, Rick--the safe way."

"Want me to climb up after you, Gar--Lance?"

"I'll meet you where you're at. Don't worry."

The rain broke with full force. "Watch that first step, Lance--it's a son of a gun."

McBride sat on the hard, wet catwalk. He began laughing and couldn't stop. The whole tower shook with his laughter. He only stopped when he and Lance started down the ladder together.

"That hurts, doesn't it, Rick?"

Marvel stayed just inside the garage while Ted hurried halfway down the driveway and opened the wide door of the LeMans the rest of the way. McBride moved the seat forward and dropped his overnight bag in back.

Marvel stepped onto the driveway. "Hope everything heals up all right." She wrung her hands as if watching a still-woozy child head back to school after a bout with the flu.

"Nothing the Big Four can't handle--'A' and 'D,' Anacin, Bengué, and holy water." McBride was slipping out of the sling.

"Don't let Westmoreland find out." Ted was already walking back up the drive. "Take care of that rib especially."

McBride tossed the sling onto the bucket seat. "This freakin' rib belt is what pains me more." He slipped his sunglasses on--unnh, spoke too soon. "I'll be mended in time for Hallowe'en."

Everybody laughed--a little.

Marvel started to cry. Ted shielded his eyes from the four-o'clock sun and looked down at the concrete. McBride fidgeted with the button just above the sleeve-notch of his favorite summer dress-shirt.

"Don't worry. The counseling will help him." Along with a morale-change on the homefront--but I better keep still.

"Sorry about everything we put you through, partner."

McBride joined Marvel and Ted at the top of the driveway. "What are you talking about, 'eh? You gave me room and board for five days, put up with my long face. I'm sorry--I don't feel . . . like I was any help."

"You were here, Rick."

"Might've been a helluva lot worse if you weren't."

"But Lance wouldn't have gone to the tower if not for the trouble at the farm, and working there was my idea—"

"We don't know that," said Marvel, wiping her eye with Kleenex. "He might have tried it . . . some other way and--"

"No need to talk about that." Ted pulled his cigarettes from his pocket.

"Probably seems odd for me to take off now, but my own family, they need—"

"Scram."

"I better move out, then, so one of you can head back to the hospital."

"Got everything?" Marvel asked for the third time.

"I got four wheels and my health--most of it, anyway. What else does a guy need?"

Marvel hugged him and reminded him to see that the Thermos lid was screwed on tight; Ted shook his head gently and gave him a Salem "for the road." McBride slid into the driver's seat, put the LeMans into 'N,' and pulled the brake-release.

Just before checking the rear-view and coasting down the driveway, he glimpsed them standing beneath the overhead door. Closer than before, but still a world apart.

McBride started her up, then went north, waving at the pair. He might've worn dark glasses and a trench coat for a living but through the years had occasionally watched the same TV shows as his neighbors. Their closing scenes sure contrasted with this one: Martin Milner and Glenn

Corbett, David Jansen, Ben Gazzara, or whoever--they always managed to straighten things out before they headed down the road and the music was brought up; but here he was, leaving a situation he could only hope was better for his being there. The Vibetos needed professional help, which he wasn't able to give, and something a lot deeper.

What about it, what meaning could he find in the affair for himself?

Instead of turning west at the STOP sign, McBride took a right. He wanted to go past the water tower one last time. The Wellsian invasion-machine from Mars stood motionless, silent. Before slowing down, McBride checked the rear-view for any cars behind him but saw only the score of white hairs where two days earlier there'd been less than a dozen. He took a drag on the cigarette, and hot menthol tingled his tongue like Novacain. The bottom rungs of the ladder were higher off the ground than forty-eight hours earlier.

Somebody'd learned from the ordeal anyway. What'd he learned?

McBride took another drag on the cigarette and turned around in a driveway. He put the top down when he came to the STOP sign where he'd heard the rain crow on the last trip back from the acreage. He headed west, into the sun. The August breeze blew his hair straight back, patted the taut surface-muscles of his head and neck; it caressed his bare arms and throat just like . . . McBride switched the radio on.

At first the words, beat, and tune harked back to something like the first page of a dusty scrapbook album, perceived too quick to be made sense of right away. He turned the volume up. A recent chart-climber, some black man telling how it never rained in Indianapolis in the

summer--McBride knew better. On the left appeared the hospital, where Lance Vibeto was in a special ward on the fourth floor. McBride said a Hail Mary for the Vibetos as he drove past. The LeMans hit fifteen and moved into gear. White clover dotted lawns, clematis adorned front yards; young elms, sunburst locusts, small red maples caught the sunlight all down the avenue. McBride heard, felt the Pontiac hit twenty and slip into another gear. The brass and female backups sighed together, and the second verse started up. Rich sound, superb engineering. McBride tasted hot menthol again. The convertible moved into still a higher gear at twenty-five. When was the one time in particular he'd heard that guy singing about being smiled at by his wife first thing in the morning, getting the kids off to school, always showing up late for lunch with his wife but never finding her mad?

Two months earlier. After getting an unexpected ten-day vacation. He had the kitchen radio on, at six, that morning in June, while Jean and the kids washed almost-toast down with too-sweet orange juice and he made the last-minute checks.

He reached the end of the avenue, a T-intersection, and braked for one more STOP sign.

He had to turn one direction or the other.

At the same time the backup vocalists echoed the closing words of the verse, the echoes of the rain's message finally got through to McBride, and the light came on the rest of the way. He knew what he needed to do. And what he didn't dare do.

To blazes with what he'd been planning for weeks; he left those wearisome particles of guilt imprisoned in that lonely, nearly forgotten motel room, seeing now only the green leaves of the peak of the summer of '68. Richard McBride, age forty-four, took one last drag on the Salem and tossed it to the street, just as O.C. Smith, the bongos, and the chimes started in on the final refrain of a song about God not making little green apples. The traffic cleared on the left and right, and soon but not too soon it was

May 1986, again nearly four in the afternoon, and you and Jean are waiting for the traffic to clear at the same T-intersection. You've gotten your kids to the age Lance was at then, and far past it, steering them through an America of bewildering insurance policies, new cars with plastic fenders and faulty carburetors, houses that sprang up overnight and started falling apart almost as fast, an America of an abandoned Hippocratic Oath, of deregulated industries and utilities, computer-based this and that, cornfield-gobbling shopping centers and chain restaurants with hypnotic papier-mache faces.

"Ted died three years ago, right?" Jean asks as she checks for cars from the north and you from the south.

"Four. He didn't last long after his attack."

"And you heard about it through another friend who used to be with Treasury? You and I should've gone to the funeral."

"We stopped writing about two years after I was here. Can't say why, we just did. And I didn't feel like keeping in touch anymore."

"I understand." Jean lights a cigarette. The traffic's heavy. "But he and Marvel stayed together. Then, where does Marvel live?"

"I think she went back to be near her folks, Wyoming or Nevada, somewhere out there."

"Wonder if their son ever got into motion pictures."

"I have no idea." You adjust your sunglasses. "He took a year off, then graduated from high school in the next town. He started college at one of the state universities in Montana, to study filmmaking, but that's all I know."

"You said there was a part of the story you never told me, McBride." There'll be an opening in a couple seconds.

"Tryin' to help the Vibetos made me feel like a phony, Jean. Before I'd even left Columbus, I planned to leave you and the kids; I figured on filing for a divorce as soon as I got back." You feel cold-sweat numb at finally telling her.

As you quickly make one last check for traffic, Jean shakes her head and laughs.

"I knew that. I just never said anything after you came back and didn't go ahead with it. What was there to say?"

Like on that August afternoon, the traffic finally clears, and you whip the old LeMans left around the corner and drive south, along the same boulevard that brought you into town this morning and nearly eighteen years ago, the boulevard connecting with the four-lane U.S. highway. With the mother of your three grown children sitting at your side, you're again heading home.